

Morgan Meis &  
J.M. Tyree

Wonder,  
Horror,  
Mystery

*Letters on Cinema  
and Religion in  
Malick, Von Trier,  
and Kieślowski*

WONDER, HORROR, MYSTERY



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Fig. 1. Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)



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The BABEL Working Group is a collective and desiring-assemblage of scholar-gypsies with no leaders or followers, no top and no bottom, and only a middle. BABEL roams and stalks the ruins of the post-historical university as a multiplicity, a pack, looking for other roaming packs with which to cohabit and build temporary shelters for intellectual vagabonds. We also take in strays.

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*spontaneous acts of scholarly combustion*



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## Acknowledgments

We completed this book during the lonely days of the pandemic, sending each letter twice to ensure that each writer had the chance to revise and reconsider, while retaining the back-and-forth flow of responsive correspondence, in which each writer takes the other's ideas to heart. This strange, slow, and surprisingly effective method of composition meant that our book could dissolve at any moment, might never be completed, and could risk crashing our friendship where our ideas clashed, yet none of these things happened. In writing about contemporary cinema and religion in the form of a book of letters, we selected three filmmakers whose movies got to us. Yes, we see an ongoing critique of secular modernity and Weberian disenchantment in these pictures, one that unrolled alongside our own lives. No, we still don't agree about what any of it might mean, but the trust involved in listening to one another at length feels valuable. The lyric subjectivity of the "I," we hope, might be useful in uncovering something of our encounters with art, and with one another, both together and alone, and with a small audience in mind, of readers that might be wondering what they really believe right now. We thank Eileen A. Fradenburg Joy and Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei at punctum books for their faith in (and patience with) this outlier project, off the map of conventional criticism. We dedicate this work to our respective spouses, the writers Stefany ("Shuffy") Anne Golberg and Emily Mitchell.

— MM/JMT





# Wonder

On Terrence Malick



Dec 7, 2019, 11:47 PM

Dear Morgan,

With his new film *A Hidden Life* set for release over the holidays, I have been thinking once again about all of our good conversations and arguments about movies — in particular about Terrence Malick and *To the Wonder*. Especially about the images of Mont-Saint-Michel in the movie. I wanted to send you this photograph (in P.S. below) that I took from the vantage point of the road bridge they've built across to the holy tidal island. I remember seeing pilgrims crossing in the mud, up to their knees in the water, while tourists from all over the world milled around waiting for the bus back to the parking lot.

What was your experience of the place when you visited so long ago? I remember thinking, when I was there (and, later, at Chartres), that it would have been good to walk through these pilgrimage sites with you and ask you all sorts of questions about your religious conversion to Catholicism in Sri Lanka. My frame of reference for these places is so different. For me it all started with my own hidden life in the movies — Malick's Mont-Saint-Michel and Orson Welles's description of Chartres as an unsigned anonymous masterwork in *F for Fake*. Do the movies make us credulous or cynical? Is the moving image designed to reveal the world or to fool the spectator? Does the cinema carry something essential of reality in it or is it more like a conjuring trick? Do films help us see everything more clearly or do they divert our gaze and beguile the time?

After arriving home to America from several long stretches in Europe over the past five years, I feel like these places are now part of me even if it was watching movies that got me there to begin with. The same is true of Château du Haut-Koenigsbourg in the Rhineland, which served as the castle prison location setting in Renoir's *Grand Illusion*. These three very differently toned pictures now have autobiographical resonances for me



that I cannot dissociate from the movies in which I glimpsed them first in Renoir's, Welles's, and Malick's films. The way I remember it, the local congregation in Chartres held their service in the basement, ceding the splendor of the cathedral itself to the tourist hordes. The Virgin's Veil held a meditative alcove of sorts but if you sat there, people would take photographs of you while you prayed or wept or stood by skeptically pondering — *F for Fake*? At Renoir's castle, the fog was so thick on the day of our visit that the view commanding the Rhine Valley was spoiled, and I kept thinking of the scene from *Grand Illusion* where the North African officer imprisoned by Erich von Stroheim with Jean Gabin is explaining his great love of translating Pindar, a little island of profoundly moving humanism amidst the storm of war, and ascribed to one of the minor and marginalized characters.

I'm surprised by how little I hear anybody I know talking about *To the Wonder*. It seems to me that all of the attention of the Malick-crazed went to *The Tree of Life*, but I liked *To the Wonder* a lot more for some reason, perhaps because it is so "minor" in comparison with the "major" ambition of *The Tree of Life*? It's quieter, less thundering, less rhetorical, more intimate, smaller scale, more human, less cymbal- (and symbol-)crashingly profound but all the more appealing to me for those reasons. Repeated viewings of *The Tree of Life* have deepened my appreciation of the film as a visual poem. But in that culminating scene where everyone is hanging out on the beach in the afterlife, I always feel a kind of rhetorical phoniness creeping in... *To the Wonder* feels warm, modest, troubled, mixed up, and unwieldy in a way that I enjoy — it's an experiment and has the feel of a cast-off. It's almost a delightful failure.

I remember being a little bit shocked at how banal a lot of the stuff at the real Mont-Saint-Michel appeared to me on my own visit in comparison with the film. You can buy a toy samurai sword up there, for example. That felt more Chris Marker than

Terrence Malick! Malick's Mont-Saint-Michel, for me, was far more moving than the real thing. What I take to be Malick's belief moves his images of the place into a personal and fervent zone of expression. For me, the film seems to visualize belief and to reveal how the world can look different, more alive and more remarkable — more wonder-filled — when seen through the eyes of a conviction of some kind, aesthetic, moral, or religious. Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way* springs to mind here, not that I'm any expert on Kierkegaard! The artistic, the ethical, and the spiritual temperaments experience exactly the same empirical reality on three different planes that diverge greatly but also overlap, like alternate dimensions converging on some special location of powerful magnetic resonance.

Some fragment of me still resides up there in the abbey windows overlooking the water through ancient green-colored glass and another scrap of my ghost floats through the images of the holy mountain in the film. I'm in the penitent's maze at Chartres and I'm clipping a flower from a potted plant to lay on a dead enemy/friend in a fogged-in castle from a war that ended over half a century before my birth, and some thirty years before my grandfather trudged through France behind a cannon, finding Calvados, ladies of the town, and starved Russian POWs along his way from Normandy to Trier. Maybe I never returned home after all, from those foreigner's journeys, or from those trips to the cinema. Something like this conception of how space and time are expressed through different inner states — and seen, heard, and felt through his characters' inner monologues — strikes me as one possible key to unlocking Malick's films — or maybe to the movies more generally?

Surely I am not saying anything new here? From your friend  
JMT

*P.S. Here's one tourist's view of the thin place at the holy island.*



December 19, 2019, 12:09 PM

Josh,

It is interesting that you asked me about my first experiences at Mont-Saint-Michel and then immediately about my conversion to Catholicism in Sri Lanka. As if the two were directly related. In fact, my first trip to Mont-Saint-Michel happened when I was eleven years old. As you know, I wasn't raised in the Church. My baptism in Sri Lanka happened at thirty-nine years old. So, the two things, going to Mont-Saint-Michel and being baptized in Sri Lanka, couldn't be more unrelated in my life....

And yet, I think you have a point. Experiences like being in Mont-Saint-Michel WERE actually like tiny time bombs in my consciousness, the way I look at it now. What happened to me when I was eleven ended up bearing its strange fruit twenty-five or so years later. This is something I think Malick captures in *To the Wonder*. On one hand, you can look at the experiences in your life in a pretty flat way. I could just list different things that happened to me. You know, "August 13th, 1983: saw an amazing medieval fortress and church on an island off the coast of Normandy. Ate trout on the bone for the first time ever. Slept well." This would be an accurate portrayal of what actually happened.

And it would also miss everything that is of any importance. Because what happened to me at Mont-Saint-Michel, and what happened to me that entire summer I spent with my aunt in Paris and traveling around Europe, was that I was continually shocked and astounded by experiencing the world in new and surprising and destabilizing ways. I was opened up. My heart softened. I'm not sure exactly why it happened for me that summer, the summer of Mont-Saint-Michel. Probably, a number of forces and accidents in my life all came together at once, the way those things happen. I was a smart and already pretty cynical eleven-year-old kid. But wandering around Europe with my aunt knocked the cynicism out of me, for a time. Later, of

course, it came back, the coldness, the hardness. And then I had to fight it off again.

All of life, in a sense, has been like that for me. Learning various ways to protect myself from the empty deadness and disappointment of the world... and then realizing that it is the self-protection, the putting-on-armor, that contributes to that very sense of deadness. In fact, when I'm opened up, when I'm simultaneously moist and brittle, snapped in two and knocked on my ass by the otherwise insignificant beauty of the world, that's when I see the world as more like a mystical hovering than like a flat and dead list of events and... I don't know, mute causality.

I see Malick's films over the last few years as an attempt to put that specific way of being-in-the-world, the Mont-Saint-Michel way of being-in-the-world, into a film. Whether this is successful or not is another question, something we can talk more about. But I will say it is an incredibly bold and moving thing to try to do. Crazy perhaps. Parts of *The Tree of Life*, as you say, fail probably exactly because he tries too hard. And many of the scenes in most of his recent movies with all the fucking muslin floating in the breeze and people wandering around meaningfully on the beach... I don't know, they probably aren't the right images for the feeling he's trying to get. Maybe he already got it all back in *Days of Heaven* with some of those late evening shots, the magic hour out in the fields. Maybe everything else is just piling on.

But I think he wants to try, at least. I think he wants to show me, on film, what it felt like for me to be eleven years old and wandering around at the top of Mont-Saint-Michel utterly astounded and utterly convinced, finally, that something in my heart has been right all along, that life is not simply a cruel trick, that the throwing myself headlong into experience does provide real-world confirmation that something very strange is going on here, being alive, and that it matters very much indeed how we go about it.

That's what the movie is "about" for me. But I wonder what it is about for you. I wonder why you see it as worth talking about and as more successful than his previous offerings. I mean, you suggest that the world must be transformed for people like Malick and me who come at it through "conviction." I know what you mean. I've tried to describe what that's like for me above. But I also wouldn't call it conviction. Since my conversion, I'd say I'm less convicted than I ever was. I used to know the world was meaningless. Really know it. Now I have no idea what the fuck the world really is. But I see it as huge and pulsating and real as I did, for a brief period, when I was a little kid. That's what belief is for me, opening myself up to that. Opening up to the wonder, I guess... though that sounds terribly corny.

But I'm not sure, then, that I fully understand what watching a Terrence Malick film is like for you. I mean, I think it is interesting that you bring up *F Is for Fake* in contrast to *To the Wonder*. You're on to something interesting there. The way that film brings attention to the very way that it constructs reality, to its own lies. Orson Welles was, of course, fascinated, especially in his later years, with art as the long con or something like that. But then again, Welles was also the great hero of Andre Bazin and the idea that film actually penetrates reality rather than simply playing wonderful games with the fact that reality itself is a series of games. I guess we are somewhere at the core of belief here. Do we believe in the world or not? I think that where a person comes down on believing in the world is probably also where they come down on what the movies are, what they do. Funnily enough, I didn't really love movies when I was younger. I really came to love them, to believe in them, once I became a practicing Christian. I started to have patience for the slow and difficult movies that used to bore the crap out of me. I started to see movie makers as, at least sometimes, the artists who believe in the world, its wonder, its strangeness, its intense reality, more than anyone. Someone asked Alice Rohrwacher (whose films are incredible to me) whether she is a person of faith, given all the kooky Catholic themes in her films. She said something like,

“I make movies, so obviously I’m a very religious person.” I assume she said that with a sly smile on her face. It’s a cleverly ambiguous answer. Something you’d like, I think. Because, in a sense, she’s saying that making movies is enough. That’s a religion in itself. Maybe that’s closer to the form of skeptical belief that you take to the world. But I don’t want to put words into your mouth. You tell me.

warmly,

morgan

Dec 19, 2019, 2:50 PM

Dear Morgan,

Rohrwacher's splendid *The Wonders* would make for a fascinating double bill with *To the Wonder*. I just came across this quote from Godard that might interest you as well: "I started from the imaginary and discovered reality; but behind reality, there is again imagination." (And behind that?)

I can relate to feeling opened up by Malick's art. The images you mentioned from *Days of Heaven*, of magic hour out in the fields, the insects among the plants, or the men in combat encountering jungle creatures in *The Thin Red Line*, or the waving grasses of *The New World*, or that momentary glimpse of something small being covered and buried in *The Tree of Life* (do we ever see what it is?)... these moments form points of continuity between his films. It's about the act of noticing or seeing, obviously, but I think there is much more to it than that. I think Shklovsky's words from "Art as Technique" ring true for Malick, who also wants to avoid the way in which "life becomes nothing" and our automatized processing of mundane perception "eats up things, clothes, furniture, your wife and the fear of war." This beautiful notion suggests that art restores our eyes and gives us more to attend to. The passage also suggests the pain involved in *To the Wonder* when love fades between Neil (Affleck) and Marina (Kurylenko) and lovers stop paying attention to one another. Sometimes all the dancing couples in Malick's films get exhausting to watch but when movement is no longer dancing it is ordinary and invisible again. Habitual modes of perception have devoured "your wife." Anyway, I like his films better when they hurt. In *To the Wonder*, it hurts to see them gain and lose their wonder, to glimpse it again with another lover, to circle back in their lives from France to America and to be cast adrift in their home countries where they feel like strangers after so much time away. I feel the presence of the angel with the flam-



ing sword barring the return of Adam and Eve to Eden. Malick's films always have this exilic quality.

We share this "map of tenderness," as Giuliana Bruno calls it in her book *Atlas of Emotion*, centered on Mont-Saint-Michel, with Malick's film, and with millions of other pilgrims. Recently I fished a little ceramic bowl out of a storage box that had an image of Mont-Saint-Michel hand-painted on it, and my wife's name painted on the bottom. The bowl was cracked and Emily wanted to throw it away but I spent some time gluing the thing back together and now it serves to hold some odds and ends. Seeing the image on the bowl reminded me that when I visited Mont-Saint-Michel with my uncle I had the uncanny feeling that I had been there before, when I had not. I must have seen the image of the place a hundred times in movies, on postcards, in books... I had a powerful false memory of the place that I cannot account for except to say that it activated or reactivated something in me. So did the bowl. And the movie. I would be hard pressed to say what that something was because I do not know.

Which brings me back to your words about conviction. You say that, after your conversion, you feel less convicted but more open. That is my experience of art in general and Malick's films in particular. I suppose we're ultimately resting on "French territory" indeed if we follow Montaigne's example of using your expression of faith as an instrument of skepticism rather than certainty, and linking arms with his great maxim, "What do I know?" After all, the opposite of *The Tree of Life* was *The Tree of Knowledge*, and it seems to be one of the themes of Malick's films to ask where all of our knowledge has taken humanity, if anywhere. The serpent promised us life "as gods" but our instrumental, exploitative approach to knowledge seems to be represented by Malick in terms of our ugly flat modern office buildings (in *The Tree of Life*) and by the environmental degradation that is investigated by Affleck's character for his job in *To the Wonder*. These very settings display a certain kind of ugliness

that marks them as anti-cathedrals, perhaps, places that are the opposite of Mont-Saint-Michel. (Although one of the reasons I like *To the Wonder* is that it reveals how Paris can be just as drab as anywhere else when it is experienced through a perceptual depression... and how America holds its fair share of wonders.)

The wonder isn't any particular place but rather a way of seeing everything through the lens of love. It's not that Mont-Saint-Michel, or anywhere else in particular, is the only place of revelation, but rather how you see everything around you, and, indeed, the person with whom you share your life. Perhaps we "see" life through our partner, in a rough analogy to the way we see Malick's vision through his camera or even as refracted and changed by the vision of his cinematographer, Emmanuel Lubezki. Lubezki is brilliant at seeing what the director wants to have revealed, although, ultimately I have a suspicion that Lubezki and Malick don't hold the same worldview, and some of their films together, like *Knight of Cups*, don't work so well. Both *The Tree of Life* and *To the Wonder* are meditations on marriage and how the agony of fusion and separation works to alter one's vision of everything else.

You're right to challenge or complicate this whole notion of conviction. While I am not a believer in any particular religion, my way of seeing things is probably shaped in some fundamental way by my readings in Buddhism over the years. There is something somewhat similar to Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarization, I believe, in the Buddhist texts on emptiness and Buddhahood. How the same thing/place/person can be seen/viewed/experienced/encountered either as suffering or as intensely filled with life.

Maybe I have read too much film theory but I get nervous when the word "reality" appears in any account of the movies. Are we sure we know what reality is or means? I take it to mean something like what the filmmakers wish to convey, or what an artist hopes we'll see. We take something of a good film with us

out into the streets after the screening and feel that the world is remarkably strange and seems new. The effect, however, strikes me as feeling more like a drug than anything I would normally associate with conventional ideas of religion. It is a temporary state of reorienting our encounter with the world. This goes beyond a merely ocular effect but it is one that's embodied and physical, and suffused with emotion. It's not just mental or perceptual. It's four-dimensional in the specific sense of altering our experience of time. Cinema takes time but also gives back time. It is very odd that way. I think cinema wears off, again, like a drug or a fever, whereas I imagine that religious practices probably permeate life at a far deeper, more basic, and organic level. Maybe I am not giving art enough credit but I don't like the conflation of art and religion. Of course, religion can close people just as easily to the encounter with otherness, but I imagine you would say that's not really religion.

This effect of good cinema on the spectator is as real and as important as anything I have experienced anywhere by any other means. It has the capacity to recontextualize the world outside of the sanctuary of the theater as being poetic or transformed. Because film changes our capacity to contemplate our experiences, I think Kracauer called something like this process "camera-reality." (There's that nerve-wracking word again!) I won't use the word "holy" (although Kracauer calls this "redemption") because that begs too many questions for which I don't have any answers. Even the greatest film is, in an ultimate sense, a two-dimensional flat plane, or even, to take it farther, just celluloid in a can or a bit of data on a computer. Welles might be hinting in *F for Fake* that cinema is an illusion but maybe what he's really trying to say is that it would be absurd and blasphemous in a sense for him to pretend to compete with Chartres. It might be a form of idolatry to take up Bazin's view of the cinema as being capable of some deeper relationship with reality, perhaps? I do think Malick is sometimes liable to a Romantic blasphemy of this nature, that at times he is overly taken with film's seductive power. That is to say, I think that Malick in large measure shares

Bazin's view of cinema, about which I have my doubts. I imagine we differ on this, and that your view is more like Bazin's. That difference, if I have identified it correctly, makes for good conversation.

I'll close by mentioning how careful Malick is about his titles: *To the Wonder* can gesture in a general direction of travel, like Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, but it also seems to capture a sort of "apostrophe" in which art dedicates itself or offers itself "to" the wonder or addresses the wonder. So, I don't find your notion of "opening up to the wonder" to be corny... but I suppose that is the risk of such a title and such a wonderfully uncynical cinema. It hurts to admit this but I am not totally on board with Malick on this and I am not really sure why that is.

Some notes from your friend JMT

*P.S. Having broached this topic of film and reality, would you be interested in outlining your ideas about "mystical realism" at this stage in the conversation, with Malick's film in mind? That might provide a good point of departure for thinking through To the Wonder. Happy Christmas!*

December 26, 2019, 11:44 AM

Josh,

Okay, so in 1929, a Dutch filmmaker named Joris Ivens made a short film called *Regen* (*Rain*). You've probably seen it. It's one of those things that gets shown in history of film classes and whatnot. Ostensibly, the film records a day in Amsterdam. It's a day when it happens to rain. At the beginning of the day, there is no rain. Then, drops start to fall. Soon, the city is transformed by a rainstorm. Not a huge storm. But enough rain to change the character and pace of the day. Later, the rain slows and then stops. The city goes back to the way it was before the rain.

You could call the film a documentary. It's as close to straight realism as we get with film. There are no actors or sets or external lighting. There is no sound, though the film often gets shown now with a score from Hanns Eisler (student of Schoenberg, which is not uninteresting) that, to me, fits the film pretty well and that was paired with the film in the 40s at some point. Anyway, the point is that on the surface, this is a film that you could say has a more or less one-to-one correspondence with reality. There was a rainstorm in Amsterdam one day. This film records that event.

Except of course that this is complete bullshit. First of all, the footage was collected over several years. So, there's no day. There's no rainstorm. The whole thing is cobbled together from a series of experiences in order to "record" something that never happened in the first place. Also, the film is heavily edited in the sense that there are continuous jump cuts and juxtapositions. The entire film is essentially one long montage. The drama is created by the pace and flow of all the quick cuts. And then there are the visuals, which are never straightforward. What actually is rain anyway? Is it the drops falling from the sky? Is it the accumulation of all the water? Is it drops hitting puddles? Is it the way the sky looks? In the film, the rain is all these things and none of

them. Much of the time, we get the feel of the rain through the various and multiplied reflections. The coming of the rain is like the transformation of Amsterdam into a fun house of mirrored surfaces. Everything begins to reflect everything else. And the film itself is reflecting all of this.

If this is documentary, then what's it documenting? What's the reality that we are being shown? Where does the "real" stop and the "representation" of the real begin?

The answer, I think, is that the two cannot be separated. Fiction is part of what makes reality real. Representation does not stand outside of reality, it is part of what constitutes reality. There is no reality without reflections. There are no things, no objects, without images of things and objects. A thing is its image. An image is a thing. A story is a reality. Reality is a story. The film *Regen* is real, it is a real thing in the world. And it also reflects other things in the world, helping them to be real. Reality is a tumble and it is also a jumble. It has no smooth surfaces. It is doubled over on itself and contorted and weird as shit. Reality is mystical all the way through to the very core. By mystical I mean that reality is always hiding itself exactly as it reveals itself. The tricks and games are part of what it actually is. The mystery is constitutive of the thing, not a surface manifestation or something you pass through on the way toward some kind of resolution.

I've come to think of this as "mystical realism." Mystical realism is true because reality is, in fact, mystical. The truth that reality is mystical means that truth is thus necessarily confusing and impossible to pin down. You will forever be in the fun house because there is nothing other than the fun house, which doesn't mean that nothing is true or that everything is relative or any of those sorts of simplistic thoughts. The necessarily mysterious nature of reality is in fact real. It can be shown, though that showing will, itself, always be mystical in nature because the nature of nature is to be mystical. Film can be true when it is true to the mystical nature of reality. There are tons of ways to do

this. Film can be mystical realism by setting a camera in front of a window and filming the Empire State Building for eight hours and five minutes and then seeing what you've got. What you've got in that film, by the way, is not unmediated reality. That film is mediated all the way through, from the specific nature of the film stock, to the artificial lights on the Empire State building, to Warhol's romantic visions of New York City that stimulated the idea in the first place. That's okay. That's good. Because reality is mediated all the way through. It's mystical.

Film can also be mystical realism by indulging in the fantastical and constructed nature of itself as a medium. Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* is mystical realism because, to me, the film is about the fact that there is no dividing line between fantasy and reality. Reality is constituted by fantasy and vice versa. The film's not about some other place where fantasy can be found. It is about the fact that film can, through its own tricks and games and illusions, bring us closer to the tricks and games and illusions that are the very fabric of reality in the first place. To be as close to this unstable truth as possible, to dwell in the vibrating, tense undulating shadow world of real reality is, in my mind, to be close to God. Of course, part of being close to God is accepting the fact that reality is so mystically weird that you can only be close to God by being in the constant process of forgetting what mystical reality is like and falling out of relation with it every day. Every day is the process of remembering and trying to reproduce what it is like to be close to God. And then forgetting again. That's part of the mystery of mystical reality. Which is also delightful and funny and strange and sad. And plenty of films express and portray and explore this strange structure of daily being, and those films are mystical realism too.

In a sense, everything is mystical realism because that's all there is. So how could there be anything else? But, of course, and paradoxically, some films are more mystical realism than others. So, we look for the films that get us closer to the way things

are, and the way things are is mystical realism. A film like *To the Wonder* is especially mystically realism because of the very fact which you pointed out. It isn't "The Wonder." It is *To the Wonder* because it is in the nature of reality for there to be some hiding involved and for the very thing that is most obvious to be most elusive. We are in Heraclitean territory here. Nature loves to hide, and so the job of a mystical realist is to show nature in her deepest nature as hiding, to show reality as a hider. She's doubled over on herself. The task of art is not to iron out the creases. That would be to destroy the truth, which can only be true by being doubled up, folded, covering itself. The job of art is to show the truth precisely as the convoluted thing that it actually is. That, again, is mystical realism.

much love, morgan



Dec 27, 2019, 1:22 PM

Dear Morgan,

I enjoyed your account of *Rain*! Reading your notes on Ivens made me want to watch the film again, and, when I did so, I saw more than before. I cannot really view the film as mystical in its intentions — was there ever a more secular filmmaker than Ivens? Maybe we can meet somewhere in the middle of this theoretical thicket and suggest that the world's irreducible complexity — things, places, and people seen through the lens of art — is dramatic and profoundly mysterious. And there is something medium-specific about film, at least in its 20th-century, photochemical incarnation, that links it with unrepeatable and poignantly complex moments of time, captured or reflected or distilled on the day, that we experience decades later as spectators as seeming to have been bottled forever like some exquisite perfume. My Buddhist-inflected perspective leads me to propose that *Rain* is a film that the viewer experiences either as boring or fascinating, empty or astonishing, in almost exact proportion to their own level of interestingness as a person. Actually, I think that's also true of Malick's recent films. They contain tests of the audience's life experience, ability to empathize, and capacity to sit still and patiently notice others and the world. That's what I value. But they are also experimental and somewhat modernist films, so a comparison with Ivens makes sense to me on that plane.

I wonder if you were thinking, directly or indirectly, of the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev and his 1907 essay "Decadentism and Mystical Realism"? In particular, I found these passages resonant with our discussion of Malick:

With the artist there ought not to be religious tendencies only, but rather a *religious world-feeling*, and then in his art will be manifest the religiousness of everything in the world, the religious depths of everything being disclosed in this. The

decadentist world-sense hinders the artist from immersion into the depths of the religious mystery of the world and only great artistic talent can catch sight of the religious realities, despite the decadentist rendering asunder from being. Authentic genuine art is as it were a photo-imaging of absolute activity, a reflection of eternal ideas. It is necessary most of all to be rid of that prejudice, that religion is of something else, some sort of special sphere. Religion — is everything, religion — is in everything, or it — is nothing. The religious world-feeling reveals the depths of being in everything, it as it were is an opening to the mystery of creation.

...

Mystical illusionism either passes over into mystical realism or it degenerates and becomes vulgar, extinguishing being.

I can't help thinking that these ideas provide substantial if oblique illumination on Malick's filmmaking, and, in that regard, I think you're exploring an intriguing critical concept here. As I understand it, Berdyaev appreciated how decadent art challenged modern secular ideas of rationality and progress but found its Russian proponents lacking in a proper spiritual grounding. My gloss on this might be that Berdyaev understood how artists were needed to challenge modernity's disenchanting and joyless regime of rationality, by entering the realms of dreams, madness, and fantasy, but that he felt the decadentist "world-perception" and "world-concept" remained redolent of the "illness of spirit" that plagued modern life with selfishness and perversity. His call, then, is for a counter-reformation in modern art, if you will, from which genuinely spiritual artists would arise.

If we were translating Berdyaev's concept to contemporary filmmaking, we might consider Lars von Trier as a decadentist and Terrence Malick as a mystical realist. Both artists understand, at a very basic level, what the *problem* is with conventional narrative filmmaking, and its (over)reliance on conventional notions of realism, whether those are called psychological real-

ism, capitalist realism, bourgeois realism, domestic realism, or Hollywood realism. Perhaps both filmmakers could be called very late modernists in the specific sense that they challenge the fundamental rules of storytelling and reveal them to be built on questionable assumptions, I'm not sure. But Berdyaev probably would view von Trier as a decadentist filmmaker because he scorns both narrative and moral conventions, flouts politeness, and undermines beliefs in systems such as detection and medicine in favor of exploring extreme states of self-destructive faith, madness, supernatural fantasy, and other forms of "mystical illusionism" that often degenerate into "vulgar, extinguishing" modes. Whereas Malick does seem intent to trace the "religious world-feeling" that "reveals the depths of being in everything" and, for this reason, his films provide "an opening to the mystery of creation."

Which brings me back to watching and rewatching *To the Wonder*. What struck me anew was the way the film recapitulates the themes of paradise lost and paradise regained. (And the purpose of art as it relates to time and memory—somewhat near the end, when Affleck and Kurylenko are back in the States, together but not happy, there's a glimpse of Rembrandt's bathing woman that Kurylenko is snipping out of an artbook, presumably for use in a collage, that I find poignant.) A secular person can understand the film's suggestions that life is a pilgrimage and that love is what makes life beautiful, and that the loss of love turns a heaven into a hell, etc. (The demon's comment from Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* always feels apropos: "Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it. Thinkst thou that I, who saw the face of God..." etc.) The place we live doesn't matter—it might be crowded Paris or the Oklahoma suburbs. With love in one's life it's a paradise wherever we are. Without love, there's "something missing," as Kurylenko's French daughter from a previous relationship suggests when they're in the USA and Affleck refuses to marry her mom. I love the sequences of the couple goofing around in the supermarket, by the way, and, equally, but more painfully, the strange doubling return to the Sonic drive-in restaurant, where

their destructive fight begins after her affair in the Econo Lodge. As I mentioned before, however, Malick speaks up for America and allows it to hold its own against Paris, or rather, shows that without love Paris can be a screeching underground hell of its own. Another doubling perhaps worth mentioning: the flickering images of the couple filming themselves, happy, in the window of the train, near the beginning, which we might contrast with Kurylenko's miserable look around the subway trains later on when she's "in exile at home," much later on in the film.

This whole notion of our human life as a form of exile — paradise lost — brings the movie a critical Christian dimension. For all of its shots of Kurylenko dancing at sunset and McAdams looking around her farm in fetching red dresses, with the wind whipping up her loving smile, *To the Wonder* ends on a rather somber note. Affleck and Kurylenko are separated. She's in the French countryside, licking buds on tended stems, perhaps in an orchard. (Is this The Garden? Far from it... yet it resembles a Potential Garden/Garden To Be/Garden Remembered/Garden That Was/Garden That Might Never Happen Again... heartbreak.) Meanwhile Affleck is living in what looks like yet another new house, it would seem, once again dislocated and endlessly American in his itinerant ways. There may be another child glimpsed here, a brunette? There seem to be two children, actually, an older girl and a younger boy. The sequence is brilliantly oblique. (I'd love to take up the film's technique, and especially how it puts time in blender, and estranges the viewer from ordinary reality, since this is a perceptual defamiliarization that also hints at how the same image or the same moment might be viewed as paradise or as exile from a position of ardent yearning.) Has Affleck blended his family just as Kurylenko tried to blend hers with him? The classical European music here plays as she attempts to make the old world new and he tries to put down roots in the new world. Or is it her, after all, Kurylenko, in blue or purple in the sunrise, back in Oklahoma? Is Odyssey-like return to love and home possible? I paused the film at this point to look more closely. The woman's face is, deliberately, not leg-

ible. Has the impossible happened? Has time split in two? Has paradise been regained, outside of time, or is this just another sequence of memories, like the stunning closing image of Mont-Saint-Michel? Where are they? When are they? Is this world heaven or hell? What does she shout at the world? Is it, "Wait?" Then something in French? Why isn't it translated? Does it matter that we cannot hear her? I love this film.

What they share, in the closing image of the "wonder" of the holy island, is a memory of the past. Might we say that for Malick time cannot be regained? We are sinners, broken and exiled, wandering this world, to use a more specifically Christian set of terms that fits the film. Pilgrims who get a chance to walk on the holy mud once in a lifetime. We are very lucky if we ever know real love for very long. We lost what we had; we lose what we have. Not just our possessions and eventually our health and our time on earth. But if we are human we also lose love, we stray and err so badly. Love once lost never returns, try as we might. There is a memory of Mont-Saint-Michel to share. It is almost like a postcard, like the postcard of Mont-Saint-Michel I'm looking at now as it sits on my desk next to my computer screen. The noble idea that we once loved and might love again. But love, once broken, cannot be repaired. We try and fail. We lose paradise and wander in search of it everywhere, but it is nowhere to be found once it is lost.

Or is the implication of the ending that we can pick up the pieces later on, with new friends and lovers, in a new home, or on our own, shouting at the animals or the sky in a French pasture? We remember the wonder and we want to regain it. The film, I think, makes a point of not only not saying that this is possible, but also not saying that this is impossible. Rather it (the film) or Malick (if you prefer) doesn't pretend to know if such things are possible. Why would we expect Malick, only a human artist after all, to know this? All we know is that we yearn for something beyond ourselves. We are riven but also seek to love and be loved. The lost past drives us on to try to find a better future.

Meanwhile, we sin and pollute, we mistake our world and ourselves and hurt those we love. The honesty of this picture!

Christianity, unlike the Pollyanna positivity of New Age spiritualism or “change the way you see the world” American commercial hucksterism, contains the deep temporal problems of paradise lost and original sin. Christianity has the specific and potentially tragic problem of historicity insofar as Jesus’s life happened in the past and his return has been delayed, it would seem indefinitely. This world isn’t heaven and it can never be. We have been in exile from before the beginning, because of what happened before. We are pilgrims whose ancestors lost their way and wrecked our world. We experience time as finite and irreversible, at least here in this world and in this life, the only ones we know. On the individual level, we repeat the same mistakes and patterns, rejecting love that is offered and entering what Blake called the “endless maze” of folly, in *Songs of Experience*. Malick’s songs are also, I think, songs of experience. There’s that hippy song, “Woodstock,” about how “We got to get ourselves back to the Garden.” Well, no. Malick is far more skeptical about whether that’s possible. I adhere to that critical ambivalence, if I am understanding it correctly, that Malick weaves into the ending of *To the Wonder*. My own impression is that Malick lives in faith but doesn’t pretend to have the faintest idea of whether that faith is warranted. Maybe that’s what faith is?

Your friend JMT

December 30, 2019, 11:41 AM

Josh,

Not only would I not say that there was never a more secular filmmaker than Ivens, I would say that there is no such thing, really, as secular film making. Wow, so many double negatives in that sentence I'm not even sure what it means. But you get my point. Secularism is a legal and political concept. Separation of church and state type stuff. But art, to me, is not a secular arena. I mean, there are plenty of artists who think it is. But they are simply confused, which is fine. Nothing wrong with being confused. Nothing wrong, even, with making great art and believing, incorrectly, that it is somehow "secular." But art, by its very nature and history and purpose, is the realm of the sacred.

But you've made the very point I am making with your quote from Berdyaev. Actually, it sort of annoys me that Berdyaev speaks so cogently to this mystical realism idea, since I'd come to the formulation more or less on my own. Of course, what is one's own? My view of art, writing, my own writing, my own ideas, is that the whole point and purpose is to be a channel. To be a conduit of that which was never exactly one's own in the first place. So, great, Berdyaev has already made the point. I guess I will have to read more Berdyaev. Or maybe the point is that I should never read any more Berdyaev since I'm thinking his thoughts anyway. A slight side note here. I bought Berdyaev's Dostoyevsky book some years ago and have picked it up, read a few pages, and put it down several times since then. Something about it always agitates me and I stop reading. I've toyed around with writing a small book called "Nabokov vs Dostoyevsky," which would tell strange and delightful stories about Dostoyevsky's Swedenborgian mystical weirdness and bring up uncomfortable facts about how even great "rational enlightenment" philosophers like Kant are impossible truly to understand without mucking about in this religio-mystico material. What, really,

is Kant all about in his search for/prohibition against intellectual intuition? But that, my friend, is another discussion! I digress.

Also, though, it is not another discussion. It's the very discussion we're having. What does film do? What does art show us? What's it to be alive? What is reality and how do we confront it really?

I love everything you've said, every observation about *To the Wonder*. If those are "secular" observations, by the way, then the Pope's a bear who shits in the woods. You are not secular, my friend. But that's easy for me to say, I know, since I don't think anyone is secular. Are we at the end of an age, I sometimes wonder? Are we witnessing a period drawing to a close, a period in which the illusion of secularity fades away? Interesting, too, that it would be William Blake who returns to us at the other side, bookending the Secular Age quite nicely. Actually, my own airy speculations aside, this is precisely what Charles Taylor is getting at in his *A Secular Age*, if one likes airy speculations grounded in lengthy and weighty philosophical tomes.

But back to the movie. Your thoughts on *To the Wonder* provoke the following observations. I really took in the sense of its narrative rules the third time I watched it, and this gets at something you've said so wonderfully. There is a totally fresh relationship to time in this movie. It isn't, as the harried and annoyed viewer to this film is apt to say, it isn't that the film has no narrative or that it is "impressionistic." Actually, the film is quite structured. But it is structured according to the logic of emotional time, rather than the pace of a story or of lived experience. It is as if Malick took a normal story, removed all the parts that most people would call "the story," and left only the deepest moments, the moments in life where you know in your heart that you were absolutely and truly alive, both in your sense of joy, or pain or whatever. I have this memory of when I was a kid and I woke up early on a Sunday morning. I knew that my parents would be getting up soon and making me and my sister breakfast. I



knew that I would soon get to eat my favorite cinnamon rolls (the kind from those old frozen cardboard tubes you used to put in the freezer). I felt deeply cared for and deeply “at home.” But it was too early for anything to happen. So, I was awake and just waiting. And the sun was coming through my bedroom window. And the morning sun was catching the dust motes that were floating ever so slowly around my room. A feeling of joy welled up in my stomach, almost like a feeling of nausea, but with none of the pain or fear. An overwhelming feeling of fullness as I watched the motes and the sun and waited for the day to come. I will never forget that moment, even though nothing happened. But everything happened. I knew something about the universe, about God, in that period of blissful waiting. Terrence Malick makes movies about that, instead of about all the things that happened to me the rest of the day, many of which might have been actually quite interesting, from a narrative or storytelling standpoint, probably far more interesting than the few minutes with the motes and the sun. But as Malick knows, it is the moments with the motes and the sun that sets the ground for the possibility of everything else. As you say, the scenes of the family goofing around in the supermarket have managed to capture a form of experience that we rarely get to see in works of art, and very rarely in films. Something tremendously precious there, in the good sense of the word “precious.”

The doubling you are talking about, the simultaneous viewing of paradise lost and paradise found comes from the fact that these sorts of moments are bigger (in the spiritual sense) than the others. They contain the seeds of everything else. They are the conditions of possibility for whatever happens to us... all time is contained in them, if you know what I mean....

But, as you say, we don't get to opt for paradise, we don't get life as a continuous rapture of dust motes and sun. I love all the things you are saying about faith and Christianity here. That's what faith is, going into that “fallen” place where Bardem is dwelling every day. The Bardem priest is an amazing charac-

ter and I love the way that Bardem plays him. And I wouldn't call him an unbelieving priest. He gets it, in his heart and in his head. His homilies are exactly right. But he doesn't, as most of us do not, he doesn't get to touch the light of the Spirit and have it warm his hand and get the sense of immediacy and confirmation that such a thing would give. Perhaps certain kinds of "organic mystics" get to do that. Who knows? But the rest of us do not. So, the work of it is in the going out and being with the suffering humans in the actual non-Romantic day-to-day shit of their suffering, and joy and whatnot. This is the work, which is real. And the fact of Mont-Saint-Michel, the possibility of dipping your toe in the holy mud sustains it, and yet God as God is always receding. Even being at Mont-Saint-Michel is just being at a castle church. There's nothing there. You're never going to get the confirmation beyond the hints and whispers... which, by the way, is not BECAUSE of the fall. The Fall is a story that confirms what we know to be the case. There's no reason for the Fall, actually, which is so wonderfully captured in the story of the Fall, which has to have been willed by God to have happened in the first place. So, who's fault is it, really? The condition of being fallen is simply necessary because it is what we are. We know that it is, because we are it. Bardem is a priest of the necessary situation of the Fall, which isn't something that happened, but which is the scenario in which we find ourselves as the kinds of creatures that we are. Being human is being-like-this, being-like-Bardem. It is a condition you cannot work your way out of. The only "solution," which isn't a solution at all, is to work yourself further in, something that Bardem struggles to do, as do we all.

But the other part of the movie, and I'd like to talk about this more, is Malick's using his own experience, his own failings as a human-being-like-Bardem to show what happens in the course of a life where we think that our decisions and who we want to be matter too much. We think we have to make it the way we want it, and therein we lose the thing that was already made. That is how we throw paradise away, and I think the film is a very deep

showing of how that works, in an emotionally exhausting playing out of the stages in that process. Maybe this is too vague. But if you have a sense of what I'm getting at, I'm eager to hear what you think about the actual "structure" of the movie.

with love,

morgan

Jan 1, 2020, 2:16 PM

Dear Morgan,

Happy new year! About the Bardem character, Father Quintana, I agree with you that he holds a central place in the meaning of *To the Wonder* despite being a supporting role without much screen time. A *New Yorker* feature by Chris Wiley, “The Americans Who Confessed Their Pain to Javier Bardem,” contains some insights about how those segments, with Bardem interviewing the struggling residents in the community of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, were filmed by Eugene Richards:

Do the interviewees know that their interlocutor is a Hollywood actor and not an emissary of God? Richards says that all were informed that they were participating in a work of fiction, and that Bardem was not a priest. “Most people knew him as the murderer in *No Country for Old Men*,” Richards said. “A couple people knew him as Penélope Cruz’s husband. Some didn’t know who he was at all. And absolutely no one cared, in the end, who he was, except that he was there to listen.”

Richards developed a 40-plus-minute film, *Thy Kingdom Come*, about these encounters. (N.B. His film is not yet available outside of festivals and is currently for sale only as an educational DVD.) Characteristically, Malick commissioned the footage but then included very little of it in the completed feature. That said, given Malick’s previous history of cutting out entire roles (and A-list stars) from his films, I suppose Bardem might feel lucky that the priest character made it into the final cut at all! I like how Malick subdues the audio in those sections of *To the Wonder* and collapses the interviews into a brief but very moving collage filled with ellipses and lacuna, undercutting the appearance of straight documentary with formal disruptions while simultaneously incorporating non-actors and ordinary people into the picture — and the story.

There's a poignant tension well-described in your notes on this vital character. I don't think I could say it better, so I will try to broaden the discussion of the religious concepts involved. If the basis of mysticism at the most general level might be said to involve the coextensive aspects of the mundane and the divine, there remains the awkward and painful question as to why we don't experience it all as love or bliss — why we feel so unloved so often, why we suffer, fail, lose out, or go dead inside for stretches of time that feel too long. Maybe that's the connection Malick is drawing between the personal/autobiographical and the collective in this film.

Apropos of Richards's title, I think one of the interesting questions here involves the religious conception of time we have been discussing. When Jesus remarked that "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15), I believe that the grammar implies nearness, both spatially (in being "at hand" — within reach or nearby) and temporally. Other translations of this passage are "The Kingdom of God is near," "shall come nigh," and, most intriguing, "hath come nigh," from Robert Young's 19th-century Literal Translation, which connotes the present result of a past action. This makes good sense insofar as the parallel claim is that "time" is "fulfilled." My professor of Biblical Greek at Cambridge had a memorable gloss on this passage, saying that if the Kingdom wasn't already here, its arrival was expected in the next few lines by the speaker. *Thy Kingdom Come*, as a title, develops a contrasting impression that, while retaining some ambiguity as an isolated phrase, seems to denote a future wished-for state, particularly when joined up with "Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven." This strongly hints that the desired outcome hasn't happened yet, and that we must wait longer. So, a stereoscopic view there on the timing involved with the Kingdom, one that is difficult to merge into a single seamless picture but nevertheless feels true to lived experience precisely for that reason.

Father Quintana's spiritual anguish doesn't feel petty or precious in comparison with those in his community, somehow, even though they are suffering in more literal ways that interrupt the flow of fiction and confront the viewer with real physical agony. Quintana is trying to live the words of the gospel, and as viewers we afford him a far more generous identity than the one he gives himself. This is a more interesting picture than the pop culture directive to "fake it 'til you make it," but it has a deeper resonance involving the role and meaning of fiction itself. As you wrote previously, a story is a reality and reality is a story. It's bizarre and hilarious as well as deeply touching to consider that the subjects of the interviews with Bardem largely knew him as the vicious sociopath hitman character, Anton Chigurh, from the Coen brothers' *No Country for Old Men*. Part of me wonders whether and why people were as willing to open up to this fictional priest/assassin and real celebrity/performer, especially when accompanied by a cameraman, as they would have done with an actual minister. I am interested in Malick's willingness to pursue this part of the project, which strikes me as something more intriguing and complex than a play-acted charade or even a character development exercise for the actor. The fictional produces something real and valuable which is then folded back into the fiction of the feature film that results. This feels subversive and disruptive to both the secular and the religious perspectives.

Sidebar: When you wrote that "a story is a reality" (which I might italicize as "*a story is a reality*"), I think you wrote modestly and with thoughtful care. But there is an obvious distinction between "*a reality*" and "*the* [only] reality," and between "*a story*" and "*the* [only] story." (Something like Lyotard's *petits récits* or "little narratives" factor in here, don't they?) Isn't there a push-pull in much religious discourse, in contrast with artistic expression, involving something like this distinction? Can religion rest content with being "only a story" rather than "the only story"? Yes and no — or perhaps that is the wrong question? Perhaps the real tension is rather between *a* story (not necessarily

*the* story, although it is for most religious people, I think it is fair to say) and *a* story that is one of several (equally?) valid stories, as opposed to a spectrum of other stories? Not a rhetorical question, and not one to conflate with a fundamentalist reading of Biblical texts as literal. Not literal, but not just a story. Overlapping stories redolent of fictional construction, but not just made up. Etc.

Malick is humane to open his movies to the broken world we share, whether we self-define as religious or secular or post-secular non-materialists, hmm. Especially what we've done and are doing environmentally to the "New" World (which feels increasingly old). I noticed the last time I flew from DC to LA — coast to coast — an entire continent extracted and exhausted, but retaining its fundamental natural magic. Ruined and yet somehow also un-ruin-able. A Christian ideal of a ruined world in desperate need of a Redeemer? Or Kracauer's complex notion of cinema as a "redemption of physical reality"? Or some other ideal that understands it might turn out to be an illusion — or a fiction? Maybe that logic of fallenness you mention extends to Malick sharing his own flaws, including flaws in his own recent films. (I *like* the fact that his newer films are so flawed, and I think their insistence on showing their flaws involves a religious artfulness, like showing the wounds or confessing one's sins.) These stories might be viewed as alternative autobiographies, and the voiceover gives them a diarist's flair, as if we're seeing the journals of a filmmaker wrestling with his process. I've read that this film does contain autobiographical elements — Malick is said to have gotten a divorce from a woman he met in Europe, or something along those lines. I don't find that this aspect adds very much to my appreciation of the film. But it's interesting, perhaps, as another example of how fiction and real life, performance and documentary, as well as narrative and memory, are bound together in *To the Wonder*, as well as in the relatively quickly produced series from *The Tree of Life* to *Knight of Cups* and *Song to Song*. These films also might be viewed as theatrical documentaries of actors acting — or meditations on the

building-blocks of cinematic language — as much as narrative fiction films.

Your question about the film's structure feels vital to me. I take *To the Wonder* to be an anti-Odyssean narrative in its basic shape insofar as it challenges the ideas of return, going home, restoring a marriage with a waiting partner, and so on. In *Atlas of Emotion*, Bruno describes her notion of pilgrimage as a process of “wandering” in which cartography is “errant” and connected with “the sensation of wonder.” Following Bruno's remarks about the role of gender in travel narratives, I would also say that I find Malick's women narrators in *Badlands*, *Days of Heaven*, and *Song to Song* to be more compelling than his male protagonists, generally speaking, and even more stringent in their anti-Odyssean drifting, since they are being recast as the wandering/wondering pilgrims embarking on their own journeys rather than as stay-at-home Penelopes waiting on some man's return.

Malick adds in a more specifically Christian resonance in considering the Edenic in a doubly poignant sense as a place that has been lost but never forgotten because it also lies within. We catch it in glimpses throughout our lives, like the image of the holy mountain or Mont-Saint-Michel, in moments of calm, nearness to others, and astonishing encounters that encompass everything from nature's sublimity to the rows of soup cans at the local grocery store and the faces at the clinic or the place of worship. Everything about this life is impossibly beautiful and painfully necessary, when viewed from the perspective this film attempts to induce. Heartbreaking, when these moments pass or we lose the ability to see what's “at hand,” to quote St. Mark again. The Kingdom promised in those radical lines of the gospel is here in a somewhat similar sense to Coleridge's “secret ministry of frost” in “Frost at Midnight,” raising the poet's hope in his child's future as one in which “all seasons shall be sweet to thee.” But — it won't — because it cannot. The yearning for something so impossibly lovely is poignant and true, but Mal-



ick is too honest to end his stories on such notes. The image of the wonder is tantalizingly near and yet we are always far away from it. To me this is one basic truth of Christianity, involving a humility in sensing that we are not where we are supposed to be, on every level and in every possible sense, but also that this fact about life is not meant to be taken as a discouragement. No wonder so many people despise this spiritually disquieting film, deemed “rotten” (47%) by the Tomatometer and condemned by “audience reviews” (37%) filled with claims of its supposedly “boring” run-time and one-star user comments about this being “one of the worst films I have seen.”

I suspect that some viewers are recoiling from Malick’s basic challenges to narrative convention—the film’s attempt to be modern and novel. There is a kind of revulsion in some audiences to anything different than generic elaborations of pre-molded storylines, a new philistinism that seeks to expunge anything other than commercial values and easily digestible narratives of phony moral clarity. Here, Malick’s radical vision of Christian experience, or its Romantic critique of Hollywood Romanticism, seems to participate in a much-needed rejection of the capitalist self as it is expressed by LA stories of uplift. Yet Hollywood, in the form of the stars who line up for tiny roles in Malick’s films, as well as in its widespread support and enthusiasm for his alternative view of cinema, tends to embrace him, since some forces in the movie business believe that Malick, like Kubrick and Scorsese, also represents a stubborn adherence to the old-fashioned promises and idealistic dreams of the New Hollywood to square the circles between art and commerce. In any event, his films raise the old questions about how the New Hollywood lost its radical edge, while these figures remained dedicated to something more rigorous and true even at the risk of alienating audiences.

I’m amazed by how closely woven together Malick’s films are—in particular, the more recent and more deliberately experimental pictures he produced in the short explosive stretch

of productions from *The Tree of Life* to *Song to Song*. That double-edged flaming sword of paradise lost haunts all of his films from the beginning, of course, from the violence and sinful expulsions into exile or worse, featuring castoffs cast out into “bad” lands in *Badlands*, losing the “days” of Heaven referenced in *Days of Heaven* (it’s not called “Heaven” — we only get days), to the “thin red line” separating war and peace, the newness of the old world for the lovers at the surprising end of *The New World* (which unfolds, pointedly, in a garden in England), and the retrospective structure of *The Tree of Life* that brackets most of what we watch as the freewheeling memories and fantasies of Sean Penn’s character as he sits in his office and contemplates universal time from a position of exile and yearning for the alternative fruit of the Garden. To an extent, memory, music, art, and storytelling all bring us into a harmonious relationship with our shared Proustian search for lost time. Malick’s ambiguity about whether or how we find it or not, and for how long these respites or recoveries last — cinema as a salvage operation on, in, and about time — seems true to life. The odyssey has no end-point because we aren’t allowed to return in any full or permanent sense — at least not in this life we share here on earth. It’s an exilic cinema that also encompasses an ongoing meditation on cinema itself.

So maybe Bazin was mistaken after all? Film produces the experience in the viewer of having bottled time’s perfume, it is true. But, as Jacques Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology*, experience is an “unwieldy” concept. This experience, no matter how seductive, cannot be the end point of cinema. What this aspect of the cinema reveals more than anything else is the yearning to be nearer to the flow of life — but also the impossibility of this task. The photo-chemical negative also represents an exile from reality — whatever that is. The cut — or even the presence of the camera itself — even the impulse to photograph something — reveals our distance from an unknowable subject as well as our unfulfilled wish to close the gap, or to emulate a more humane alternative in which we might draw nearer to the radical other-

ness that might be found in all things, creatures, and persons. A photographic negative carves out of light something that happened on the day, but the shutter speed slices out a fraction of an instant and, therefore, presents a subtly different and distanced, mechanical effect than what we saw with our own eyes when we were there or were attempting to “capture.” (Interesting word!) The motion picture camera only apparently solves this complexity or impossibility by increasing the span of attention, since it remains a view that is framed, bordered, cut, developed, and, in the era of digital technology, subject to all manner of painterly or even animated effects. That doesn’t mean it’s not “real,” since artifice, as you noted previously, carries its own reality, and the art object — and the fictional story — is a part of the world that also shapes the world. But the viewer is liable to that peculiar kind of Bazin-like seduction that is endemic to cinema.

As I see things, Malick’s cinema — especially in his more disruptive films — resists that process of seduction even as it simultaneously falls prey to it. I don’t find that ambiguity to be overly problematic, just honest and humane. This is how we all experience things over and over again, depending on our capacity to love, and regardless of whether we self-identify as people of faith or not. Malick places the viewer in provisional and incessantly interrupted sites of glimpses, cuts, and overlapping voiceovers in film after film that emulate the position of his characters as people facing a shared exile from the seamless dream of unmediated contact with... whatever one wishes to call it. (The wonder, the tree of life, paradise, the good lands, the days of heaven, the new world, the place beyond fighting over bloody borders and red lines, the places of song, life, reality, love, etc.) This paradox inevitably also applies to the artist. The structure of cinema is revealed to be exilic, like life. Malick’s cinema is part of the modern reckoning with storytelling conventions while also grounding itself in a Christian perspective on the disenchanting aspects of modernity itself, it is true. In a sense Malick is attempting to fulfill Berdyaev’s call regarding the “tasks of religious art,” and for work that is both modern and spiritual, whereby “the an-

guish regarding Heaven is transformed into a thirst for the new real flesh of life.” Malick’s recent films contain various elements of *ars poetica* — reflections on the nature of filmmaking and the fictionality of fiction. To my way of thinking, this places them in an indirect line of inheritance with searching religious works that retain their modernity, like Eliot’s *Four Quartets* and their proposed “raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment always deteriorating”....

The use of voiceover in Malick’s films provides one set of keys to his art, would you agree? Don’t these voices establish our experience of his art, as well as the experiences of his characters, as a shared quest for meaning that foregrounds storytelling as the most fundamental human act? Some stories are simply more resonant than others, perhaps? Is that how it boils down for you as well?

Your friend JMT

*P.S. An image of some postcards from Mont-Saint-Michel attached.*



January 7, 2020, 12:25 PM

Dear Josh,

I am enjoying your little pictures, btw. I'm not sure I have anything to say about them, but I wanted to acknowledge that I get them and look at them and am delighted by them. They are a testimony, also, to your own capacity for looking. So that's nice.

I'll confess that I'm not sure where to go with this given how exhaustively you've treated all the important issues around *To the Wonder*, and perhaps film, in general. That's a wrap, my friend!



Of course, you've given me one little nugget potentially to fight about in your characterization of religion as committed to *one* story versus *a* story. But you also suggest a way out, which is precisely the one I'm going to take. That's to say, I'm gonna pass on this one. The mystic, to my mind, is able to see this "debate" as a trap, a trap within which everyone loses. On these rocks everyone founders, religious, agnostic, atheist. Everyone. It's a trap.

Here's a little tidbit on which all mystical realists agree, whether they are explicitly conscious of it or not. God outstrips everything. We have some sense of the "truth" of God every time we realize that there is something more, every time we are confronted with the realization that the smallest speck of dirt confounds us at every turn, even as it is undeniably real, real precisely to the degree that we cannot pin it down, encompass it completely, know it beyond the always provisional tools with which we confront it. Because God is the name we give to the fact of outstrippability, every word uttered of God should be spoken with a little smile, a wink and a shrug. A bit of laughter. But all in nonetheless. All in on the game of being, becoming, and passing away.

I find it amusing that in all the films Malick has made since *The Tree of Life* there are these scenes of people just being together and having fun, goofing around, the play of everyday life. Often, the scenes don't work so well. At least to me, they can feel forced. Like Malick simply directed his actors to "play around," "be in love," "have a good time." The actors aren't able to make these moments seem genuinely spontaneous, for the obvious reason that the moments are not spontaneous. These are the hardest moments to create because they are the very ones that "just happen." Film is up against its most difficult structural antinomy here. On the one hand, film is all about control and as you say, the weird idea that experience can be "captured." On the other hand, film is all about the possibility of something happening, an event transpiring in front of the camera that is more than what we ever expected. To me, all the wonder and greatness of film exists in the tension between those two otherwise irreconcilable truths. So, like you, I kinda like the sloppy and otherwise "failed" nature of all these Malick films. They know they can't do it. But they do it anyway.

Do you remember the scenes from *To the Wonder* where they are goofing around in the supermarket? Nothing special happens. The couple and the child push the shopping cart through the aisles. They put products in the cart. But they are laughing and playing in a way that feels quite authentic to me for brief periods, and then often feels forced again. I especially love these scenes because being in the supermarket with my spouse is like that. She has a heightened sense of how strange and wonderful the supermarket is. She never moves from aisle to aisle with any plan. She moves randomly, changing her pace, suddenly rushing ahead, then stopping, then laughing about some inane product she's just discovered. It is like being in a supermarket with someone who's never been to earth before. Time changes when you're in a supermarket with my Shuffy. Malick seems to have experienced something similar and to have found a way to capture that feeling on film. Such an unforgettable rendering

of time that in an ordinary film would have been considered beyond meaningless.

But here Malick manages to reproduce an experience that we rarely get to see in works of art, and very rarely in films. And it is precisely because these are such banal moments, such in-between times, unimportant episodes in the aisles of a supermarket — that they can be so suddenly imbued with joy. Everything feels saturated with the divine, which is, in fact, the case. For me, that's what Malick wishes to convey or provoke, especially in his newer films, as uneven as they might feel. I cannot forget the scenes of desperate people crying in parking lots from *Song to Song*, another much-maligned but extraordinary film from Malick's recent outburst of new work.

I'm not sure that I am able or want to say much more about it than that. These are the treasures that can be shared in watching *To the Wonder*, and all the other films Malick has made in the last few years. That these treasures go unappreciated so often and by so many is the oldest story ever told.

love,

morgan

Jan 19, 2020, 8:19 PM

Dear Morgan,

Yes, the supermarket scene in *To the Wonder*, the crying in the parking lots of *Song to Song*! (Two of Malick's most interesting, least loved, and most dismissed films.) Or the moments where the actors seem to be improvising in a space, maybe just playing with a lamp (Affleck and Kurylenko) or standing in a field (Affleck and McAdams). These are the moments in the film when the experience of time seems to stretch and bend, to alter our perception of time with a paradisaal glimpse through the misery of love lost. I think the effect is most akin to Tarkovsky's description of poetic time, with its inevitable spiritual resonance, but it also reminds me of the more secular Shklovsky's notion of perception refreshed by making works of art more difficult to absorb quickly, or resistant to strip-mining for some inner meaning or message that allows us to throw away the husk of the artistry itself.

These moments also remind me of Wordsworth's "spots of time" in *The Prelude*, since they tend to involve acts of memory casting back into a reparative state:

There are in our existence spots of time,  
That with distinct pre-eminence retain  
A renovating virtue, whence — depressed  
By false opinion and contentious thought,  
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,  
In trivial occupations, and the round  
Of ordinary intercourse — our minds  
Are nourished and invisibly repaired

Wordsworth adds: "Such moments / Are scattered everywhere." He finds himself recollecting "an ordinary sight" — a girl with a pitcher of water balanced on her head, walking into the wind — and finds himself at a loss to describe the "vision-



ary dreariness” of her “lone eminence.” A Terrence Malick film made in 1805.

Those who accuse Malick of slowness I think are so utterly lost that I am almost worried for them and what they might do to others and themselves in their haste to disregard the world and “get to the point” of some movie story. I find the fear of and revulsion towards his more experimental work to be both fascinating and revealing of our cultural moment, when any formal difficulty is met with outrage and contempt. Time spent with real art is always given back. Art’s mystery is connected at a deeper level with how we experience time differently as a result of the encounter. And our memory of the encounter.

I suppose that some of these critics of Malick are similar to the critics of Wordsworth who argue that the latter wrecked *The Prelude* by revising it along more theologically “correct” religious lines that seemed to move away from a broader Romantic pantheism. In one revision often cited by scholars, the “dark / invisible workmanship” in *The Prelude* of 1805 — similar in its timbre to Coleridge’s “secret ministry of frost” that collects frozen water into remarkable shapes — finds itself sitting next to the awkward addition of “immortal Spirit” in *The Prelude* of 1850. To give the critics their due, I think it’s fair to claim that Wordsworth’s revisions tamed his poetry and damaged the fabric of his insights by making them less artful and disorienting. By initially joining art and spirituality, Wordsworth reached into something profound, but, later, by making art much more subservient to one religion, he retreated from the full complexity of his own work by making it less defamiliarizing, less difficult, and more consonant with dull platitudes and sermonizing. We’re less shaken because the text feels more devotional and saccharine.

I find some of that Wordsworth-ized revisionism — the feeling of *The Prelude* of 1850, if you will — in certain sections of Malick’s *The Tree of Life*. (In truth, that film is extremely complex and rewards multiple viewings, each of which almost seems to

contain a different film.) But, mostly, this blanding down is not the case in his films. And the reason why, perhaps, involves that strong sense of suffering suffusing his work and culminating in *A Hidden Life*. Malick is painfully aware of tragedy. His protagonists are often witnesses to violence. His characters dwell on their losses and often seem like marooned outcasts or lost wanderers. We seem to agree that Malick's work involves Christian stories — the exilic story of paradise lost (one that is always remembered and sought) and the tragic story of an executed holiness (but one that always remains to be discovered or reassembled, at least in a partial or potential form).

Where we might differ is in my contention that his films contain a surprise for both the secular and the conventionally religious person. The arrogant secular world of reason feels disenchanted and materialistic and the conventionally religious experience seems overweening in its unwarranted certainties as well. This is one reason why I think Malick is an important 21st-century artist, since we currently face the double encroachments of destructive zealots from both camps. Materialist capitalism is rapidly wrecking the planet while the levels of what they call “ecumenical hate” in American Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism have reached such extreme degrees of heartlessness in certain quarters of the USA that, according to the Catholic writers Antonio Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa, they might be compared in some ways with the ideology of Al Qaeda. Many thoughtful religious thinkers find a tonic of opposition to capitalism and unjust laws in Christianity, while the forces currently crushing us also claim the mantle of faith. This fact cannot be ignored or dismissed as some fluke, even if their understanding of the divine is grotesque. What's clearer to me is that wiccans, tree-worshippers, and Quakers are not to blame for our current predicaments. Anyway, there's my two cents on the matter, not that you asked!

I think ultimately Malick is looking for an antidote to human violence and trouble in a form of artful seeing that views the

ordinary mundane world as sacred, if only we can learn ways of encountering it rightly or unlearn wrong habits deeply embedded within us. But it's not just a matter of seeing—the ocular metaphor so connected with cinema proves desperately inadequate—but rather of binding ourselves more closely to what we love, or weaving ourselves in with a love of things, creatures, and people. All of which is my roundabout way of saying that I hadn't intended my questions to you about fiction and storytelling as a trap. Personally, I find that the secular notion of the New Testament as *\*only a story\** and the widely held assertion amongst many believers that it is *\*the only story\** to be equally unsatisfying. If you meant that the binary structure itself is a trap, that response makes good sense to me, but I find these polarities interesting and useful. Some stories are more nourishing than others. Including Malick's.

This brings me to a new discovery. Thanks to the good folks at Grasshopper Films, I was able to gain access for us to watch the Eugene Richards film *Thy Kingdom Come*. It's an extraordinary little movie and I found it deeply moving to see the full film and to watch Bardem encountering all of these broken and suffering people in small-town Oklahoma. I realize that the film isn't by Malick, and in some ways it is a curiously anti-Malick production in its extremely anti-Pastoral, anti-Romantic dwelling in abjection. This aspect of *Thy Kingdom Come* is a credit to Richards as a photographer and filmmaker, but also, I think, to Malick, in unfolding this sidebar project as an important part of his production process on *To the Wonder*. There is very little that is wonderful about what's happened to anyone in this film. Or, let me backtrack and put this differently: *Thy Kingdom Come* insists on allowing in everything that is not wonderful. And that seems fitting to Malick's larger project, especially in *Badlands*, *Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *A Hidden Life*, of including the violence, pain, misery, wandering, and pathos of the fallen world in his pictures.

And so we witness a movie star, a great actor, dressed up as a priest and trying his best to perform the role of one. Bardem's opening voiceover sets humble parameters: "Is this a true story? Yes, I would say so. Is the priest a real priest? No. But it's as if they were waiting for him." Throughout, but especially at the beginning of the film, Bardem's face is removed from the frame or filmed from an angle that deemphasizes the star. At times, we only see his hands, sometimes folded together, sometimes touching a cancer patient or a developmentally disabled person, or held at the glass with prisoners on the other side. We meet a regretful ex-KKK member radicalized to violent racial hatred in prison, but also a Black prisoner who directs Bardem what to do with his cigarette: "Put it on the floor and stomp it out. That's what they did to me." (He later scoffs after Bardem leaves his cell, mocking the idea that he's actually seen a "priest.") Then there's a woman who has endured multiple sexual assaults and says of herself: "I've always been fat. I've always been dull." And another woman whose child accidentally drowned in the bath when she was sleeping something off. We also get glimpses of a couple doing better because he's gotten a job as a gas station attendant. We see Bardem lift an old man from his wheelchair so that they can lie in the sunlit grass and the actor can point out a passing butterfly.

This is a realm of bleeding heartbreak and unstinting suffering with only occasional moments of relief, such as when one subject sings his kid to sleep after changing his diaper. No, it's not all going to be okay. No, there isn't a rescuer on the way, as far as we can see, or that promised future when "a Comforter" (John 14:16) will arrive. (I don't say this with any mockery whatsoever, since the power of the story of the Comforter is of the essence here — its factual lack of literal veracity is less important than its comforting story.) While I was watching the film, with tears building up in my eyes as these stories are intercut, weaving and returning to their subjects several times over the course of the forty-plus-minute film, I felt not pity but an overwhelming sense of nobility in almost all of these people. They deserve so

much better, and there is so much suffering. And it is suffered by people that nobody seems interested in noticing, much less listening to, or helping. I apologize for these platitudes.

Bardem seems to recognize that many of the people he's talking to are the saintly ones, if I can put it that way, and that he's only there as an occasion for them to unfold their stories. Not to say that his interventions aren't thoughtful. To the prisoner with whom he shares a cigarette, he takes the risk of telling the man that he doesn't believe him when he claims that he doesn't dream of anything. Bardem exists in the realm of vicarage in the truer sense, of being the conduit or connective tissue between these people and something larger. The film's premise should feel like a conceit and fall flat—it shouldn't work. Nothing about this film should succeed, and yet Richards has elicited something astonishing, I think. The whole production carries the risk of coming off like a Hollywood actor helping himself train for a role as a priest by collecting and harvesting these stories and lives. But thanks to Bardem's demeanor and Richards's way of filming from a respectful axis, the film doesn't feel exploitative or exoticizing. It wasn't that the subjects "bought" or "didn't buy" Bardem's "performance." It's more that they didn't care, that their stories were so raw and their pain so personal and overwhelming that they just needed to tell someone. Certainly no one, from the filmmaker to the actor to the viewer, is looking down on what happened to them. But that additional layer of distance involved with this fictional priest somehow fails to detract—and in some ways adds—to the overall effect of compassionate listening conveyed by the film. The viewer feels honored by the trust of the person telling their story. Maybe that can help us, somehow, simply as an act of courage to emulate their telling of the truth.

What struck me while watching *Thy Kingdom Come* was that the priestly function of confessor is in some ways just that, a *function*, one that allows, in its basic humility, a human story to emerge. It sounds drier and more soulless than intended to

put it this way, but confession becomes a narrative function. It matters very little, in one sense, that Bardem is not a real priest, since it is the confession itself that matters. Fiction produces something real. A fictional priest is as good as a real one...? Not quite. That's also a volatile, even dangerous or possibly blasphemous notion, no? A fictional priest and a camera crew are something different than an organized, institutional, confidential confession. Are we to take it from *Thy Kingdom Come* that there are not enough real priests — or social workers, counselors, or political representatives — around listening to these stories? Or that an actor can replace the priest because it is the narrative function of confession itself that is the thing most desperately needed? (Unlikely.) Or that there aren't enough good fictions, good stories that are capable of encompassing the world's really acute distress?

I will admit that I am emotionally stirred up by what I've seen, in the best possible sense. I feel *Thy Kingdom Come* only makes *To the Wonder* feel larger, more complex and more expansive, less the film that everyone dismissed and more the movie that moved us.

What are your thoughts on all this?

Your friend JMT

January 28, 2020, 11:39 AM

Dear Josh,

The most incredible thing that Javier Bardem does in *Thy Kingdom Come*, to me, is that he just sits there much of the time, unflinchingly. He listens and looks into people's faces. He faces it. He faces them. This is an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. I am not a priest. I am training to be a deacon and I engage in a ministry around my church on the east side of Detroit in which I am frequently confronted by situations not unlike what Bardem faces in the film. I do a poor job of it most of the time, I am sure. But the hardest thing about being with people in genuine states of acute suffering, grief, anger, despair, the hardest thing to do is nothing. The hardest thing to do is to honor the confrontation with that person, with the story, with the unfathomable reality that each person presents. The easier thing to do is to put up a barrier. The barrier generally consists of advice, or offering potential solutions, or whatever. Rarely does the impulse to intervene in some way actually help the other person. Usually, it simply blunts the sense of shock and bewilderment that comes from confronting another human being in the rawest of raw states. But that is what must be done in these situations. And it is exactly what Bardem does. What to do next will come of allowing the situation to unfold of its own accord. Perhaps a way to help, to do something will come next, perhaps it will not. That's not for the person doing the priestly work to pre-decide. That, to me, is where genuine faith is tested. Genuine faith, as I understand and experience it, is simply the trust to enter into that space of radical confrontation with another and to know that what needs to happen will in fact happen when all the barriers are dropped. And to know that you don't know, that your plans and ideas are laughable, that you are entirely outstripped by the reality of another person, that you are a joke but that you have to go through with it anyway.

So, yes, this is an amazing short film. It fits together powerfully with *To the Wonder* and, as you say, with *A Hidden Life*, which Shuffy and I watched together in a mostly empty movie theater at a 9pm showing this past Christmas Eve. Which was something.

If I had, for some crazy reason, to discard all of New Testament scripture and keep just one thing, it would probably be the famous lines from Matthew 25:37–39.

Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?

What Bardem is doing in all the scenes of *Thy Kingdom Come*, of course, is fulfilling those lines. So when is the kingdom going to come, then? What is the kingdom? Does it exist somewhere in time, in the future? Is it somewhere out there, a heaven?

To me, the answer to this question, insofar as there is an answer, is that the kingdom is constantly present all the time and can be accessed with complete simplicity. That's to say, when the other person is confronted radically and with complete trust in that confrontation. When the prisoner is visited. When the sick person is shown care. There it is, the kingdom is fully present. I want to acknowledge something discomfiting about what I'm saying here, because it doesn't quite jibe with the general sense of "making the world a better place" you get from typical do-gooderism. I have no idea whether the world is becoming a better or worse place. I have no idea how you would judge such a thing. And I find the polemics around this question utterly empty. I don't care what happens to America or the modern world. I don't care what is the course of contemporary civilization. I opt out of those discussions. They mean nothing. I am in America. I am a part of contemporary global civilization. I neither endorse



it nor oppose it. I simply refuse to acknowledge its sovereignty. What is sovereign is the kingdom. And entering the kingdom is simple. Not easy. It's extremely difficult, gut wrenching work. But simple. You just do what it says in Matthew 25.37-39. What it really says. Not what you think it says or wish it said. Just what it says. And the kingdom will be there. You will be in the kingdom.

To be in the kingdom is to experience wonder by definition. It is to be wide open to life, to be in a state of experience that is most intense. "To the Wonder" is "Thy Kingdom Come." They are two different ways of spinning the same thing out. That is my experience anyway, and my faith. That is the core of it.

You asked me once when we were driving around Detroit together whether it isn't better, more effective and a sounder use of resources to give money to people in need through organizations that know what to do with such resources and how to make the best of them. I bumbled an answer. But what I was trying to say is that it *is* more sensible and efficient to do it the way you were saying and that that is precisely why we shouldn't do it that way. We should do it face to face. Even if it leads, *especially* if it leads to uncomfortable situations for both parties. The kingdom does not come when we try to make the world better through our distance and our planning and organization. The kingdom comes when we face the person and the person faces us and we get into it with one another, even if just for a few minutes of terribly awkward conversation and the passing of a dollar bill on a street corner. Even if we walk away feeling confused and unsure of whether we've done a good thing or not.

What does any of this have to do with film? I don't know exactly. But I find it remarkable that *To the Wonder* and *Thy Kingdom Come* are, surprisingly, even ridiculously with the absurd and insulting conceit of Javier Bardem pretending to be a priest among genuinely suffering people, with everything that, as you say, shouldn't work at all, with all of that, somehow the thing still works. The kingdom is present. What does it mean that film

can access the kingdom? Again, I don't know exactly. We are entering into the realm of stunned and awestruck silence here. But it must mean, if nothing else, that all the stuff we make up is just as powerful as all the stuff that makes us up. It means that the kingdom is fully sovereign and that we are responsible in every realm, in daily life, in art, in dreams, in everything we are responsible for finding it.

with love,

morgan

February 2, 2020, 11:57 AM

Dear Morgan,

I should clarify, in case you don't know, how much I admire your dedication to your city and your parishioners. I think of our time in Detroit often, it meant a lot to me and caused me to reflect on trying to lead a more intentional life with purpose that serves others in this broken world. When I said that a friend advised me to give money to organizations rather than individuals on the streets, I was thinking of her charity in San Francisco, which works with the homeless face to face and advocates politically. For what it's worth, my own point of view is that governments should provide shelter and food as basic rights for all people who need and want them, and that charities should not be forced to perform the role of governments. But I do feel the force of your critique, since I agree that such pragmatic talk of "solutions" is both unsatisfyingly smug and distancingly rationalized, and just, in general, highly annoying, since the urgent scale of suffering is so immense. I think we would agree that we cannot allow ourselves to unsee what's happening, in Detroit and everywhere around us. To fall back once again on my "Buddhist" version of Shklovsky, one of the things that art can do, in general, and which Malick's films can do, in particular, is restore our vision and help us see how to see. For me, that's one interstitial passageway that might be traveled between the curative waters of *To the Wonder* and *Thy Kingdom Come*.

I think I understand, too, where you are coming from in your emphasis on what most people would call the irrational. Art is in the questions business and the seeking business. It cannot be rationalized — if it could, there would be no reason to go to such great efforts to produce a film when one could simply publish a pamphlet, write a t-shirt slogan, or post a tweet. (Personally, I look forward to the day when AIs can create bad art — novels and movies — so that humans can focus on producing good art.) So, too, is religion, I believe, in its deeper guise, in the business

of questions, although I do recognize that this viewpoint might be jarring for some who find in religion some set of certainties based on rigid doctrines. What I like about what you are saying — and why I admire the way you are living — is that you are emulating the teachings of Jesus as best you can, rather than being guided by the kind of theology that leads people to this or that conclusion about some moral judgment or political policy. We desperately need more radical Christians like you. Christians can play a specific role in freeing us from the monstrosities that their Evangelical and conservative Catholic brethren have created.

But surely *A Hidden Life*, about Austrian farmer Franz Jägerstätter's (August Diehl's) nazi-era persecution and murder for his unwillingness to swear a loyalty oath to Hitler, focuses on the need for believers to resist when so many official structures of religion have been compromised beyond all recognition politically. Perhaps some sort of fanaticism is required to serve a higher purpose? It's the person of some faith who is irrational enough to reject an order to comply with evil on pain of death. I think it's undeniable that Malick wants his historical fiction to resonate somewhat with the present, and to act as a call to arms to Christians to resist what's happening now, don't you? The timing of the film's release in late 2019 seems difficult to ignore. It's not that Malick is necessarily equating any current regime with fascism *per se*, but rather that he wishes for Christians in particular to stop lending their support to a regime that is in so many ways antithetical to the teachings of Jesus (while simultaneously pretending to represent the interests of Christians).

While Malick fails to consider that other types of secular faith — Marxism in particular — were motivating much of the resistance against nazism, he does make a powerful plea about the vitality of Christian radicalism and the need for a bit of fanaticism when it comes to resisting those with the power to crush you. Courage requires faith, even if that faith is only in the idea of the future, or in one's fellow human beings. Actually,

I think *A Hidden Life* is even more powerful than that. What if believers took their faith a little more seriously? What if everyone had followed Jägerstätter's example? This is utopian and could even be called unreasonable and naive, as well as potentially self-destructive and self-sacrificing in a dangerous sense. But the historical record also shows evidence of Italian Catholic priests like Don Pietro Pappagallo (the basis for Roberto Rossellini's priest character, Don Pietro Pellegrini, in *Rome Open City*) who not only sheltered but actively aided the partisans in the era of "Hitler's Pope," Pius XII. A strictly nonviolent radical faith — one that stands ready to throw away one's life if necessary — is yet another mode of resistance. Not the only one, by any means, but the one that Malick wishes to explore here. Throughout, there is an insistent parallelism reminding the viewer of the Christians who were executed by Roman Governors for refusing to swear loyalty oaths to the Emperor, and who were put to death for being unwilling to burn a piece of grain on a pagan altar or even unwilling to purchase a forged document claiming that they had done so.

There's a kind of "insanity" here, but one viewed in a positive sense, I would argue, on the part of Jägerstätter, as depicted by Malick. I don't mean to denigrate the role of faith (or the suffering of mental illness) by putting things that way but rather to emphasize his irrationality in terms of the typical secular value placed on basic self-preservation. (In reality, of course, he is the only sane one — but, sociologically, that amounts to the same thing.) That's not to say that secular people are incapable of resisting the powerful or even the murderous without the aid of religion but rather that the believer has a specific mission of resistance that might be emboldened or kindled by an authentic sense of faith. This particular act — of being incapable of putting Hitler above God — is peculiar to Jägerstätter's conception of the divine. His wife Franziska (Valerie Pachner) does not require or even request that he reconsider in order to save himself, or to protect their family from serious trouble in their community,

because she also recognizes that this is about the state of the soul. It is not reasonable to ask him to be reasonable.

So, wife, family, town, and country all must be regarded as secondary considerations on some fundamental level. This is both right and “crazy.” It is beyond ethics, in the Kierkegaardian sense — or redolent of religion considered as a sphere distinct from ethics, as outlined in *Stages on Life’s Way*. Jägerstätter is right because he resists nazism at its core, but he is crazy because he must give up everything in order to adhere to faith. This craziness of his faith is what, for Malick, makes Jägerstätter good, although righteous might be a better word. As a cinematic point of comparison, in Dreyer’s 1928 silent film of *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, Joan’s fanatical devotion to her faith at the risk of her life is described by one of the accusers at her trial as “*insensé*,” out of her senses or mad. These are the acts that authentically religious people are capable of when others sometimes lack the spirit. For this reason, *A Hidden Life* is one of the most powerful religious films — not just a film about religion — that I have ever seen.

About a year ago I attended a lecture by the academic and philosopher Philip Francis called “When Art Disrupts Religion,” based on his book of the same title. Francis’s form of research is sociological, revealing through interviews with individual Evangelicals how contact with modern art caused many to question or abandon their faith and others to redefine and reinforce their belief. In an interview Francis makes his case for a particular framing of this discussion, and one that I think is worth quoting at length:

Many of these Bob Jones and Oregon Extension alumni [Evangelicals who studied and practiced art] say that these unsettling aesthetic encounters *saved* their faith, rather than destroying it. They experienced not disenchantment but re-enchantment through the arts. This took several forms. For some, out of the ashes of their rationalistic evangelical identity arose a different sort of religious self, one with a

newly discovered capacity to dwell in mystery, uncertainty, and half-knowledge. If that isn't a deepening of faith, I don't know what is. For others, the arts not only unsettled their previous religious identity, but stepped in as the substitute form of enchantment. People in this category speak of the arts as providing a stand-in for their traditional religious objects, a means of glimpsing the transcendent, of experiencing the power and depth of the numinous, of being enraptured by the sublime. In some ways, these latter participants are typically modern in their devotion to the secular religion of art. As Hegel once noted: we moderns have no qualms about revivifying "the corpses of dead cults" in "the guise of aesthetic objects." Hegel is being sardonic but I'd prefer to see this modern substitutionary relationship between art and religion as a reaffirmation of the deeply human instinct to find enchantment where we can — and to get creative when we can't. So much for Weber's modern disenchantment theory.

In his lecture, Francis contrasted what he called "practices of certainty" in Evangelical religion with the "practices of uncertainty" he finds in the enduring value of modern art. To "complete this thought," however, requires one to consider how art also disrupts *secular* certainties as much as it challenges religious certainties. I am not sure if Francis would be willing to go this far but it is a line of thought that emerges organically from contemplating his research. It seems obvious to me that many nonbelievers are just as attached to their conceptions or certainty as fundamentalist believers are. If one considers the clumsy and shrill "new atheist movement" led by the likes of Richard Dawkins and his "God delusion" thesis, one begins to recognize that fundamentalists and atheists often share similar patterns of thoughts in their polemics. I view them all as having almost a secret, unwitting accord that I would like to resist because I believe in cinema's complexity, questioning, and searching — and all those properties that Francis ascribes to modern art. Whether art can be or should be a substitute for religion I will leave to one side for the moment.

We're constantly being told that we need to protest the "war on truth" that is plaguing our society by taking refuge in facts — more facts, better facts, more factual facts, more carefully fact-checked facts in greater and greater numbers. No! We desperately require better narratives, more interesting stories, counter-myths, and art of greater complexity. The discourses of sobriety alone won't save us from our current crises — ecological, economic, political, cultural, or religious. Modern art — and contemporary cinema — are overflowing with challenges to dead certainties of all kinds. What do T.S. Eliot, Graham Greene, Ingmar Bergman, Kieślowski, von Trier, and Malick make of the cold compassion-less-ness one encounters in nonbelievers and believers alike? Even those artists who reject religion for themselves — or who end up in the interesting no-man's-land of agnostic uncertainty that does not pretend to know — seem to intuit the depths, heartbreak, and solace of faith or the loss of faith better than many of the self-professed champions of God, on one hand, and the fanatical gladiators against any kind of faith, on the other. Religion and cinema invite contemplation about human complexity and everything we don't know. These things refresh us in this dark age of dead-eyed polemics. This emphasis on complexity forms an alternative to the commercial view of cinema — and life — in part by attempting to express an old-fashioned critical humanism as a path for art that seeks to understand everything that is new and strange and troubling and terrifying and wonderful about the world.

Your friend JMT



February 5, 2020, 10:18 AM

Josh,

I know what you mean by calling Franz Jägerstätter a fanatic in *A Hidden Life*. You say he is crazy in a good way and I agree. He's crazy in a good way. I was thinking that he's sort of the opposite of all the funny and tragic scoundrels of faith in Shusaku Endo novels. Endo characters often want to be good Christian martyrs but they can't do it. They blow it. They chicken out. They sell out their friends. They betray the faith and the cause. They are deeply cowards. So, they are wonderful. There is a deep misunderstanding of Endo in Martin Scorsese's recent filmed version of *Silence*, by the way. Everybody was supposed to love that movie, especially art-minded Christian types. But I thought it was garbage. I don't want to get into it too much here, but Scorsese makes a hero of the European who has come to Japan as a Christian missionary. No. That is not what *Silence* is about. *Silence* is about how the Japanese already know everything they need to know and that it is the fucked up, failed, deeply human Japanese Christians who teach the Portuguese missionary something about what it really means to live and have faith. Scorsese missed this completely.

But back to *A Hidden Life*. To me, the film is a deep meditation on how we are very little in control. I don't think Jägerstätter really chooses anything. He is not heroic. He's simply caught up in something that's so far beyond him that the logic of it crushes him. The film is also about beauty. Maybe it is mostly about beauty. Yes, the more I think about it, the film is dealing with the deep theological problem of beauty. The beauty of the mountains and especially of the Südtirol. It was a surprising movie for me to watch partly because I've spent so much time up in that area of the Austrian/Italian Alps. There is something very hard to describe that can be encountered up there. Every time I visit Abbas and Margit and travel around those towns and villages, I experience it. Those old fashioned and understandably

troubling words “beauty” and “sublime” just keep popping into my mind.

The strange thing about beauty and the sublime is that we don’t really know what they are. I always loved Kant’s definition of the beautiful as basically the subjective universal, which is essentially saying that beauty is a squared circle, it has no rules, we don’t know what makes something beautiful, and yet we confront it as an undeniable reality. Beauty exists, then, mostly to mess with us. That’s something I always want to say about beauty, that it is a problem. Beauty isn’t nice or sweet or proof that everything is okay. Beauty is tortuous and strange. A beautiful person makes you behave in ways you don’t necessarily want to behave. Beautiful people and objects and things in the world make an immediate claim on us. They introduce a wild element into existence. They drive us out of control. Beauty breaks the world up, shakes it around. Beauty is not the proof that God is good, beauty is the proof that God is strange and wild.

Beauty and suffering are, therefore, not unrelated at all. They are deeply intertwined. Beauty refuses to let you go on existing in the way you were existing before you confronted beauty. Pain and suffering do the same thing. And what, by the way, do mystics run to more than beauty and suffering? What’s the point of being alive at all? Beauty and suffering, of course. The only answer that’s worth anything.

Anyway, those mountains up in the Südtirol are achingly beautiful. Sometimes a vista opens up, a series of those rose-colored peaks, a mountain meadow tucked just so into a crease in the sky. You don’t even know what to do, it is so beautiful. I’ve cried a couple of times up there just confronting the scene. It is so much, too much. Have you ever watched the YouTube video of Yosemitebear experiencing the double rainbow? Something like that.

I've never seen the full, devastating beauty of those mountains captured on film before. Malick manages to do it in some of those scenes. Or close to it. The motorcycle driving along the little dirt road, the mountains looming in every direction all around. Some of those scenes in the field, reminiscent of *Days of Heaven*. Film yearns for beauty, does it not? And generally fails in the task. But that's not a bad metaphor for beauty in general, the desire that can't quite find its object. Beauty is beautiful partly because we don't know how to have it, can't have it, are held at a tortuous distance from the thing that seems to be right before us. Film can make that ache all the more poignant.

In *A Hidden Life*, the pain and suffering that is crucial to the ache that is beauty transforms into the other side of suffering. That's to say, a confrontation with beauty is a confrontation with the very core of what is given to us in experience. This territory is beset with dangers. You don't get to hide from anything if you are going to open yourself up truly to beauty. So, the camera that lingers on the slopes of the mountains of the Südtirol is going to have to be true and honest and open to the tragedy at the heart of all existence. That camera is now going to be pulled also into the prisons of the Third Reich, for instance. In a sense, the logic of beauty demands this. Here, too, morality and aesthetics are completely intertwined, as the ancient thinkers always claimed. To be committed to beauty is to be committed to goodness all the way through. And that is going to mean a wild ride. That's the way of the Cross. Beauty and goodness do not take you to a pleasant and easy place. They take you to the crucible. That's the strange thing about being alive. The more you give yourself to beauty and goodness, the more you get burned.

So where is the camera going to go? Where is Jägerstätter going to go? How far do we trust ourselves, do we trust God, the universe, whatever, in trudging the path of real experience, real life, the way of the Cross? At what point do we chicken out? At what point does the camera chicken out?

To me, *A Hidden Life* is an exercise in the cosmic game of chicken. What does a film have to do in order to be honest about the conundrum, the incredible challenge of beauty?

Or something like that.

warmly, your friend,

morgan

February 7, 2020, 11:20 AM

Dear Morgan,

I think your meditation on beauty takes us to the right place with Malick. Of all the lost edens from which his characters are driven into exile, St. Radegund feels among the most compelling. (Strange to consider that the places we started from and ended up, Mont-Saint-Michel and the Italian Tyrol, have such personal resonance for one or both of us. Our friends Abbas and Margit live in the region near Brixen, no? I believe that is where Malick filmed the garden of the bishop's palace.) In part that's because Jägerstätter's fellow citizens — in particular, the frightening mayor character — have made a hell of heaven through their toxic absorption of hatred and fear.

But there is also another element operating in *A Hidden Life* that I am calling the Kierkegaardian one. Jägerstätter recognizes that he must let go of all that beauty in order to take his faith seriously. That commitment is one that, in a specific way, overthrows the “either/or” of the push and pull between the aesthetic and the ethical and most resembles the third sphere of the religious. It is simply a different set of demands — if that is the right phrase for it, since these demands exceed the normal run of responsibilities towards spouse, family, community, or even one's self-care — that Jägerstätter must contend with.

Would it be churlish to respond to what you're saying by arguing that this necessarily takes him into a realm beyond beauty? Maybe the difference here is semantic, since there is nobility (and, in that specific sense, beauty) in his quest. Yet even the nazi prison in Berlin where Jägerstätter is executed has green things attempting to grow just beyond that final window. Beauty cannot be extinguished. It always gets in. Perhaps that question about beauty is best left open since the word can resonate in so many different directions at once...?

I had cause to regret calling Jägerstätter “crazy” or a “fanatic”—those words should remain in inverted commas where they belong—but I’m relieved that didn’t offend you. I was a little bit clumsy, I think, in trying to get at how he would be viewed by others who were attempting to justify their inaction and passivity in the face of the nazi onslaught. The “social construction of reality” argument, including what constitutes sanity and normality, as well as an Erich Fromm-like challenge to it and to “the sane society,” was what I was attempting to grasp. I also meant to get at that Kierkegaardian element to this story that transcends a conventional account of ethics. But this is about more than an individual leap of faith and its consequences. It’s also about what D. Anthony Storm, in his commentary on *Stages on Life’s Way*, calls “Kierkegaard’s main criticism of his time” which was that “people lacked the willingness to exercise passion in their commitment.” I think Malick well conveys the sense of awe and even fear that Jägerstätter encounters in the religious authorities along his path to death. These are men who recognize in another person that passionate commitment they themselves lack or justify failing to pursue, perhaps because of their adherence to an ethical framework that include a strong dose of denial or self-preservation (the self-serving logic of, “I can do more good if I don’t sacrifice myself, people need me,” etc.) or perhaps because, unlike Jägerstätter, they simply cannot let go of being alive. (Jägerstätter never blames them.) All this, then, says something more than what Seal sings about: “No, we’re never gonna survive unless we get a little crazy.” There are times so murderously upside down that a lot more craziness is required. But very few of us are up to the task because we dwell only in the aesthetic or ethical realms rather than fully committing to that third, religious sphere of life, which is a hard and sometimes fatal way. I think Malick shares that sense of awe or fear. But he’s clearly not setting himself up as a Jägerstätter, and in fact, he includes in the film a cameo of a religious artist doing his best that feels like a self-portrait.

I sense a devastating critique of modernity building up here, if modernity is considered to be a world structured by rational instrumental calculations that serve a vision of progress which is fundamentally self-serving, with its primary goal to increase our life expectancy, live those remaining secular days in the material prosperity of maximized utilitarian comfort, and so forth. (I think modernity is more interesting and complex, but this aspect of modernity is what Malick seems to reject, with good reason.) People and communities in such states of mind have little motivation to resist or to commit. As I mentioned before, I also find this element of Malick's work to be a surprisingly potent critique of the generation of "failed seekers" (as Hunter S. Thompson called them) who emerged from the radicalism of the 1960s with a selfish and self-blinding ideology that has not served the country or the world or the planet very well. A view of Malick as a generational dissident among the New Hollywood filmmakers of the 1970s might involve a Kierkegaardian critique of the Boomers' own lack of commitment to their professed ideals. Perhaps it is the temper of the times through which we are now living, but I wonder, too, if it's possible to detect in the resonant echoes of Malick's historical fiction a barely suppressed condemnation of American Christians who don't seem to mind seeing immigrant kids put into cages as long as their investment accounts keep doubling in value every ten years. I realize that's a "different Malick" than the one that is commonly assumed. But I think it's in there...

\* \* \*

Speaking of contemporary filmmakers whose view of modernity is severely critical, I wonder if you think I was being fair to Lars von Trier earlier in our exchange? I described him as decadent, and I think that is accurate up to a point. Yet I always suspect there is more to his work than what I read and what I hear people saying, especially those who despise him. My feelings about him are more mixed, and maybe mixed up. Specifically, there is an insistent exploration of faith of various kinds

in his films, mostly obviously in *Breaking the Waves*. Faith and fanatical commitment to one's own subjective sense of things, up to the point of madness, are portrayed in what might be his best film to date, *Melancholia*. Outbursts of irrationality, often related to mental illness, but also to the outlandish and even the supernatural, haunt his work. And of course he titled one of his most powerful and disturbing films *Antichrist*, which raises questions about religion, even if the title might seem mocking, scoffing, or deliberately blasphemous at first glance. On one hand, I cannot think of a filmmaker who represents an artistic position so diametrically opposed to Malick's than von Trier's, can you? On the other hand, they both seem invested in smashing up the smug certainties of secular modernity, on one hand, and in utterly rejecting the assumptions of a dead, disenchanted, materialistic world, on the other hand. I confess some degree of critical perversity in making this pivot, but I remember that we've argued about von Trier before. (He is, to his credit, an artist that thoughtful people fight about.) Does it sound totally off-base to suggest that Malick and von Trier might be opposite sides of the same coin rather than entirely different currencies, so to speak? Having had some time to reflect on von Trier since we last discussed *Antichrist*, what's your take on him and his films?

Your friend JMT

*P.S. Attached is a closeup of a tree in the Naturpark outside Tübingen, which in certain lights on certain days reminded me very much of the shots of the woods in Antichrist (filmed nearer to Bonn, if I remember correctly). Since I cannot possibly mimic the color of the green forest in von Trier's film, I am abstracting my own viewpoint by presenting it in uncanny monochrome instead.*





# Horror

On Lars von Trier



February 11, 2020, 11:17 AM

Josh,

I don't even think I want to think of Lars von Trier as the opposite side of Malick's coin. Because I don't really think of them as opposites. They are both seekers of a sort, to my mind. And they are both interested in film as something that actually matters, that shows us something, that can shake us the fuck up.

But I think it makes sense that you call von Trier a decadent. I mean, if we think of the actual Decadents of the late 19th century, from Baudelaire to Wilde, Huysmans to Beardsley, there is a kind of obsessive exploration with the emptiness and sheer surface effect of life. There is a willingness to go there, if you know what I mean. Nothing matters and therefore every form of expression is inherently as interesting or as uninteresting as anything else. A dalliance in pure pleasure for however long that lasts. An interest in perversion for the sheer sake of perversion. A desire to test experience and the limits of experience. A willingness to tear everything down but without giving a fuck about what the outcome might be. Revolution without purpose. A love of shimmering things. A fascination with the dissolute. Disgust. In general, the willingness to be disgusted. Macabre laughter. Fits of mania followed by fits of melancholy. Suicidal longings and then almost a childlike love of being alive. The desire to persist transforming into the desire to be extinguished.

Personally, I take people like this very seriously. They are my brothers and sisters. Or more to the point, I have been them. I have been that. I don't mean to sound overly tragic and dramatic here, but when I read someone like Huysmans or look at the paintings of Odilon Redon or watch one of the movies of Lars von Trier I am taken very quickly to a memory of lying in a hospital bed after drinking more than a fifth of bourbon and having popped a handful of sleeping pills. I mean, there it is. I wanted everything from the world in those days, and I wanted,

sometimes, nothing at all. I was running away from myself and the pain of, what, what was it exactly, just of being alive and the basic wound that is existence itself? The problem of being a creature that lives and that knows it will die. Very soon it will die. And what is the point? What was the point of all this? And then running back into life with a wild abandon, but one soaked in alcohol and other drugs. A kind of mad dash that secretly hopes the whole thing will just blow up. And then also the secret hope that someone, somehow, somewhere will help.

I remember reading a couple of years ago that von Trier was making a film out of the premise that life is utterly and completely meaningless. I guess that is what became *The House That Jack Built*. I haven't seen that film yet and do not especially want to. I know it will be harrowing. But that is the point. And in a sense, all of von Trier's films are an exploration of that basic impulse. To push as far as he can into the darkness of the darkest thought. All of his films are inherently sadistic. Because he is a sadist! But, you know, an honest sadist has something to offer, which is sadism. A sadist who is trying to go all the way with it is going to teach you some serious shit about life, and art, and what the two might have to do with one another.

To me, von Trier uses film to strip the world to its bone, to expose the real truth hidden there beneath the lies we cover it all up with. We try to go through life, la de da de da, pretending that there isn't something terrible, something terrifying there at the core of it. But von Trier goes right to the inner terror. Every one of his films should end with the line, "Take that!" This is very interesting to me. It is someone looking for an answer and being willing to accept the most horrifying answer of all if it happens to be the truth. And the worst answer of all is, nothing. That there is nothing and that the whole fact of there being anything at all is just a kind of cosmic mistake. It is Sile-nus telling King Midas that the best thing for man is never to have been born at all and the next best thing is to die quickly.

This is the story that Nietzsche dwells on throughout *The Birth of Tragedy* and which animates everything he ever wrote. How do you deal with the truth of Silenus? Von Trier's answer is that you keep making films that explore the limits of this truth. He is thus the Nietzsche of film. I mean that as a compliment, of course. To me, in my experience of life, those are the only two options, anyway. And the strength of Malick and von Trier is that between the two of them one realizes the starkness of our condition. The cosmos is either completely filled with God, God besotted as the mystics say, or it is nothing at all. Everything else is a kind of hedge, a little lie, a bullshitting to avoid the issue and slide through life without confronting the central problem.

I tip my hat to von Trier. He is a genuine seeker. He is willing to take the hard answers. And I wouldn't be too surprised if he ends up in church at the end of the day, as did so many of the decadents, and as did I. And if he does he'll have earned it. Because a church that isn't earned is complete bullshit.

;) )

morgan

February 15, 2020, 7:01 PM

Dear Morgan,

You might enjoy reading this article by Françoise Meltzer, “Baudelaire, Maistre, and Original Sin,” developed from her 2014 lecture at the Lumen Christi Institute at Notre Dame University. It charts Baudelaire’s reconfiguration of his poetics after reading Maistre. The essay bolsters your case that decadence was, for Baudelaire, a form of seeking, drenched in religion, albeit of an eccentric kind born of loathing the world as a place of sin and evil. But, of course, as everyone who has seen *The Exorcist* knows, a belief in the literal existence of the Devil (with a capital “D”) can be a gateway drug to belief in God (with a capital “G,” presumably). Certainly that was William Peter Blatty’s intention with his book and with the script of the film — terror as a form of proselytizing. Baudelaire is more complicated, with his “Litanies of Satan” in *Flowers of Evil* providing one possible template for von Trier’s put-on Satanism.

Malick and von Trier: One artist’s wonder-world is another’s horror-scape? What a difference in this change of lenses!

Von Trier feels like the most Baudelairean of contemporary filmmakers. Meltzer writes of the latter:

The obsession with duality in Baudelaire is regularly demonstrated by the remark he famously notes down in his journal: “There are in every man two simultaneous postulations, one toward God, the other toward Satan.” These “postulations” of a simultaneous ascent and descent (note the topography of up and down) are further complicated by the fact that the descent is a “joy,” and is connected with love for women and “intimate conversations with animals, dogs, cats, etc.” That statement shows that Baudelaire has no illusions about mankind; not only is man given to evil, but he enjoys it. The

choice—God or Satan—inscribes the “equilibrium” between these forces with one of Baudelaire’s most consistent beliefs: Original Sin as the root of all human experience. The equilibrium can be no better resolved in this context, since sin will always trump any move toward the good, and the good will frequently turn out to be enjoying its own descent toward Satan or indeed turn out to be Satan.

I am put in mind of von Trier’s peculiar and personal appearances in his early television series, *The Kingdom* (interesting choice of title), in which he makes the sign of the Cross and then flips his hand into devil’s horns as the credits roll, smiling with an air of joyful malevolence. And this passage also reminds me of the “intimate conversations” with the talking fox who reveals that “chaos reigns” in *Antichrist*. That Baudelairean closeness with devilry is embedded in the title sequence of the film, which may be read as “Lars von Trier Antichrist.” And of course it was von Trier’s obscene comparison of himself with “Hitler in the Bunker” that got him banned from Cannes. These vile jokes carry within them not so much the feeling of “Ha-ha, the Devil dwells within me, let’s party!” but rather “Please, God, help me, I am evil at the root, surely among the worst of men, and convinced that I must be damned!”

Von Trier’s idea that humanity is evil by nature does feel redolent of the Maistrean Baudelaire described by Meltzer:

Baudelaire’s frequent recourse to children who demonstrate their potential for evil is a reminder to himself not to be taken in by the seductive promise of goodness: for him, it will always be a promise broken. Another of Augustine’s phrases from *The Confessions* can only have been endorsed by our poet: “If babies are innocent, it is not for lack of will to do harm, but for lack of strength.” The passage that follows in Augustine is as if an earlier version of [Baudelaire’s] “Le Gâteau”: “I have seen,” writes Augustine, “jealousy in a baby and know what it means.” [...] Equilibrium will always yield to,



or be rooted in, evil. It follows quite logically, then, that it is virtue that is artificial, and evil that which is effortless and natural. Consider the following passage in “The Painter of Modern Life”: “Crime,” he writes is, “the taste for which the human animal acquired in his mother’s belly, is originally natural. Virtue, on the contrary, is artificial.”

Joanna Bourke, of Birkbeck College, open to the film’s unnerving power, limns similar territory in her critical response to *Antichrist*:

The effect is breathtaking and compulsive, like a drug; I would have watched the film a second time if it had been possible. The theme of the film is an ancient one: what is to become of humanity once it discovers it has been expelled from Eden and that Satan is in us? Despite the erotic beginning, Von Trier has little interest in desire; his focus is on Sadeian extreme pain and enjoyment, the abject emptying of self and other (including the audience, who are made complicit in the sexual violence infusing the film).

Bourke’s critical generosity towards von Trier brings to mind the hypnotic and repellant opening scenes of *Antichrist*, in which a child flings himself to his death in the snow from the window of the apartment in which his parents, He (Willem Dafoe) and She (Charlotte Gainsbourg) are having sex — filmed explicitly — in the shower. Later, in the mind-distorting (or mind-distorted?) woods where they have sought refuge and healing from the tragedy, Dafoe remembers (or fabricates a memory of) seeing an x-ray of his child’s feet, which appear to be distorted or cloven. An idea emerges that rhymes with the Baudelairean riffs on Augustine described by Meltzer — this kid might have enjoyed committing suicide in order to drive his parents to madness. Augustine balanced Original Sin with his absolutely fundamental insistence that our world is good because it is God’s creation. I would argue that von Trier, like Baudelaire, drifts away into Manichaeism, at least in *Antichrist*.

Your own generosity towards von Trier positions him as a seeker in the Nietzschean mode, and I am interested to hear more about that vis-a-vis the film. I haven't read Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ* but I wonder if Bourke's invocation of Sade works for you and whether those two strands of philosophical influence on von Trier might be seen to converge. It makes sense to me to consider von Trier as a humanist explorer of extreme states of mental and physical anguish and abjection, with sexual pleasure and degradation in particular now seen as limit cases that express aspects of the human, which animals, for example, do not seem to experience with the same cruelty and relish.

But I want to cling to von Trier's films as highly artificial and constructed fictions, if only to remove myself from what's on-screen much of the time, but also to appreciate an artistic accomplishment that often revolts me more often than not. I see von Trier's films as containing distancing mechanisms of various kinds that allow me as a viewer to remember, with gratitude, that I am "only" watching a movie at key points in the screenings. Yet for this very reason I also take von Trier to be a master manipulator more than a seeker.

I know that *Antichrist* is dedicated to Tarkovsky, whose own devotion, in turn, is unquestionably spiritual and deeply religious at the core. And I would welcome your take on that hat-tip to Tarkovsky, because I find it puzzling and cannot seem to take it at face value no matter how much time I spend thinking about it. For myself, I cannot help linking von Trier to Hitchcock in his insistent artificiality, his lack of psychological realism, his Expressionist play with the horror genre, his self-aware framing of his cinema as cinema, his creepy comedic cameos in *The Kingdom* (so redolent of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*), his placing of his name above the title of *Antichrist*, and so forth. There's a kind of Hitchcockian malevolent cynicism here that I find foregrounds the movieness of movies in ways that allow me as a viewer to feel that I am "allowed" safely to explore deeply disturbing realms

from which I think I would recoil immediately and reject morally in real life.

In von Trier's grin in *The Kingdom* and in his films more generally I detect the death's head rictus of Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) at the end of *Psycho* [1960] — or perhaps Bates's earlier fleeting smile when he realizes, in complicity with the viewing audience, that Marion Crane's (Janet Leigh's) car is going to fully sink down and disappear into that muddy pond after all, which means, he thinks, that he's going to get away with it.

Once we revisit the opening of *Antichrist* through the various departments of film form and craft excellence — slow-motion cinematography, the score of Handel's *Rinaldo*, the cutting together of pornography with a special effects sequence of the falling child, all reframed as a new "shower scene" binding eros and thantos in one "Hitchcoction" — then the film starts to take on the shape of an elaborate prank that is grimly fiendish and wickedly critical of conventional picture-making. Welcome to my movie, please find your nearest exit. Oh, you're still here? Why? Haven't you left yet? No? Why? What's wrong with you? Are you sure you wanted to have seen that? Can you believe your eyes? Aren't you sick? But after all "it's only a movie," isn't it? Or is it? In his book *An Invention without a Future*, critic James Naremore describes the basic affect of Hitchcock's films as combining the impulses of laughing and screaming. Isn't that notion fundamental to von Trier's work, as well?

In one sense what's most compelling to me about von Trier's films is very simply the powerful creativity of their own fabrication and effects, as well as their insistence on messing with audience expectations regarding narrative coherence, genre, and the fate of their protagonists. I wonder, though, if I am on the wrong track entirely, or whether there really is more Hitchcock in von Trier than Dreyer, Bergman, and Tarkovsky. A counter-intuitive reading to be sure. I might be wrong about all of this. Maybe it's a case of an artist so doubled in his core impulses that

he contains and encompasses all of these urges and influences in an extremely unstable, brilliant, wildly distressing Molotov cocktail of a bomb-throwing artistic personality that is bursting at the seams in different directions simultaneously, releasing all manner of demons, ghosts, and fallen angels?

Yr f(r)iend JMT

*P.S. Here is a snapshot from a storefront in Richmond, where I found the ancient hand of Nosferatu haunting the buildings of the art school where I teach my film history courses. Sometimes horror is the only sensible response to a world gone mad....*



February 19, 2020, 10:39 AM

Dear Josh,

You are certainly right that von Trier likes to play around and likes to screw with people in making his devil's horns and playing the little devil. There is an interesting confirmation of this in some of the stories Willem Defoe tells about von Trier in the interview included in the Criterion edition of the film. Defoe says that at one point while all the crew of the film was going around introducing themselves, von Trier whispered to Defoe, "when it comes to our turn, let's just pull down our pants and show them our dicks." That impulse crops up in von Trier's films all the time. The final fifteen minutes of *Antichrist* is an extended "show them our dicks" moment. It is gratuitous to the point of making one question the seriousness of what's gone on in the preceding hour or so of the film.

Tarkovsky and Malick, by contrast, definitely make work that takes itself seriously all the way through, perhaps too much so at times. But, you know, Tarkovsky wrote something in his amazing book *Sculpting in Time* that I think links up with the previous discussion. He wrote, "Since art is an expression of human aspirations and hopes it has an immensely important part to play in the moral development of society — or at any rate, that is what it is called to do; if it fails, it can only mean that something is wrong with society." I'd say that Tarkovsky and Malick both take this "calling" quite seriously. But in his own strange way, I'd say that von Trier does too. Von Trier is making art that explores what happens when, as Tarkovsky puts it, "something is wrong with society" and, perhaps more ominously, something is wrong with the universe itself. *Melancholia* explores what it looks like when we are forced to face the fact that the universe is profoundly indifferent to our being here. *Antichrist* explores what it looks like when we confront the fact that nature is generally a hostile force and further, and this is the real shock, that we *are* nature. So, in some deep and fucked up way, we *are* the hos-

tile force that we have to confront. The enemy outside is actually inside. The point I am making is that these are spiritually serious propositions. In essence, the three filmmakers are united in making spiritually significant work that refuses to allow us to become inured or complacent in our existence. They want to create spiritual crises within the viewer. Tarkovsky and Malick want to wake us up to the kingdom of God within us, if you will. Von Trier wants to wake us up to the swirling abyss of meaningless doom that lurks within. In his heart of hearts, I believe that von Trier actually wants to be talked out of it. He is, as I suggested before, a seeker. But he is treading a dangerous line, he is getting as close to the abyss as he possibly can and may one day fall all the way in. I admire him for his courage. Like Nietzsche, he may one day snap and find himself in the middle of the road weeping and insane.

One of the more moving aspects of *Antichrist* is, to me, the way that von Trier so successfully captured the look and feel of a true panic attack on film. Indeed, the whole damn movie is worth it if only for those scenes. Both Charlotte Gainsbourg and Willem Defoe are incredible in those scenes. The scenes when Gainsbourg (She, of the movie) is having her attacks before they go to the cabin are truly terrifying, much more so than the sillier scenes of horror at the end of the movie. And the scenes early at the cabin where Defoe (He, of the movie) is trying to help her gain enough confidence just to walk across a small patch of grass are profoundly moving. The fact, as I learned, that von Trier suffers from such panic attacks himself and that he made the movie as an attempt, partly, to get himself back to some mental health make those scenes all the more powerful and also fit well into my thesis of von Trier as a sort of struggling Nietzschean seeker/artist.

So, I suppose the more that I think this through and the more that I respond to you just by writing my ideas out, the more I cannot accept the idea that a big key to *Antichrist* is its all being, in some ways, “a big joke” and that cinema is fundamentally a

place of phantasmagoria. Again, my own thinking on film is that it is not, and can never be, a place of safety. Film does not get to play with reality because it is reality. Indeed, I'm going to go out on a line here and claim that von Trier really is more Tarkovskyan than you are giving him credit for being. To me, von Trier, like Tarkovsky (and not, perhaps, like Hitchcock, though this is another discussion altogether), thinks that cinema has the capacity to cut to the core of reality, to show us something like the unvarnished truth. The truth, for von Trier, is a dark and horrifying thing. But it is, nevertheless, the truth.

Maybe I missed the joke, but the baby falling out the window scene at the beginning of the movie did not strike me as cinematic and therefore unreal in the way it struck you. I found it intense and horrifying and genuinely traumatic. The fact that we come back to that scene later in the movie to find out (spoiler alert) that She was, perhaps, aware of and even in some terrible way complicit in the death of the child only heightens the immensely disturbing aspect of that traumatic moment. Von Trier is showing us, I think, that we have deeply ambivalent and even sometimes hostile feelings to the very lives that we are otherwise supposed to hold most dear. (The creepy photos that He finds in the cabin where She has consistently put her child's shoes on the wrong feet is a powerful visual image of this ambivalence). Some part of us wants to kill what we love and also perhaps deeply wants to kill ourselves. Here is also where She begins to hate herself explicitly as a woman (and touches on the potentially misogynistic side of von Trier). The reason that She hates herself as a woman is that women are the means by which humanity reproduces itself. Since life is an essentially disgusting and hateful thing, the womb becomes the site of the crime, as it were. Sexual pleasure becomes the horrible lure by which we are tricked by nature into perpetuating the cycle of life and continuous reproduction that, by all rights, should be ended so we can finally be put out of our misery.

These are the dark thoughts, I'd say, that lurk at the center of *Antichrist*. And I think that von Trier means them. Or he is, at least, willing to explore them all the way to the bitter end. To me, to respect this film is to allow it to be the genuinely, disturbingly horrible thing that it is.... I look forward to hearing how this sits with you....

warmly,

morgan



February 29, 2020, 9:07 AM

Dear Morgan,

We might not disagree as much as you think, or maybe we do, after all — no terrible thing, that. I don't think it's necessary for us to disappear into the thickets of film theory but Richard Rushton's remarks on Bazin come to mind when I read your letter. Rushton writes in *The Reality of Film* that "realism is not a matter of being true to perceptual reality and therefore not a theory of realism's correspondence with reality, but one in which realism is a matter of being true to life." That comment may be helpful, but I might try to tinker with it further by suggesting that film conveys a view of life.

Cinema delights for its fundamental hybridity and ability to absorb contradictions and paradoxes of many kinds — like Bazin wrote, it's a "mixed" art form. I feel foolish talking about it! Filmmaking is collaborative but often conveys a strong point of view; it's somehow both impressionistic and expressionistic (an impossibility made possible by artificial lighting, lenses, camerawork, editing, and postproduction effects interacting with often unpredictable actors, natural light, or real locations); it can be highly personal while being distributed globally as mass media; it's commercial entertainment and contemporary art; and it feels like it lives very close to life while simultaneously opening up realms of special effects, animation, fantasy, dream-like memorable fancies, and illusionism. Now that the reign of photochemical film has loosened its grip on the art form of cinema, and now that the 21st-century moving image very often floats free of any moorings in a specific array of photons captured on negative film stock, movies are more interesting than ever. People care about films so deeply that they fight over them — a sign of a healthy art form. Even Presidents weigh in on the state of motion pictures.

I do admire von Trier's divisiveness and his ability to provoke a good fight. (He would be pleased if we bickered, I think....) Above all I value his resistance to what I would call the medicalization of art, the contemporary belief that works of art are like pills or therapy prescribed to make us feel better about the world and ourselves, provide uplift, prove that virtue is rewarded, contribute to a healthy lifestyle or the right set of opinions, etc. I find von Trier refreshing because he challenges something fundamentally puritanical about the current cultural consensus, which is based on mindless repetition of correct platitudes and the self-surveillance and the disavowal of anything nasty, perverse, irrational, sick, and destructive about human nature. (Ha!) By constantly denying in public that any of us are any of these things, and increasingly invading and contaminating the most basic notions of private life and self-definition with impossible declarations of cleanliness, godliness, or politically perfect viewpoints, we haven't been able to sanitize the world of these grievous flaws, maladies, and sins after all. Far from it. In fact, we might be contributing to the growth and victory of these horrifying attributes by denying that they have a deep place to hide in the human heart or soul.

When I think about von Trier's films in their totality, I get the overwhelming impression of a powerful artist who is deeply suspicious of Enlightenment values, in particular, the domain of clinical reason in which the experience of the irrational is suppressed or derided. This drift puts him at odds with liberal modernity as well, and I can see why many viewers reject his work as being misogynist or reactionary, which seems fair enough even though I think there is more there than meets the eye. I think some of his films have aged better than others, but aged rather well, however, because they feel more in tune with a world gone mad than with the illusions of calm order and technological progress that were the hallmarks of the end of the 20th century and the "end of history" that we supposedly reached. Now that history has reasserted itself and the return of the repressed is everywhere in evidence, the landscape we inhabit feels more

unhinged and deranged, like in a von Trier film. As the opening credits of *The Kingdom* suggest: “For it is as if the cold and the damp have returned. Tiny signs of fatigue are appearing in the solid, modern edifice.” All true, and perhaps truer now than when first broadcast.

Von Trier often tells the stories of marginalized people who are mentally ill, deeply religious, liable to visionary experiences of one kind or another, or otherwise overwhelmed by convictions that do not make sense or which leave them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. These characters are most often the women in his films. (Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, which I mentioned previously vis-à-vis Malick, centered on the suffering human face of a strong woman being crushed by male-dominated institutions, forms a key precursor for much of von Trier’s work, I think it’s worth noting for its “Danish” form of artistic continuity.)

The other type of character one encounters again and again in von Trier, generally male, is a kind of grotesquely “reasonable” person who offers their “help” to these vulnerable souls—a kind of help that controls, maims, or even kills. I’m thinking here of the doctor played by Kiefer Sutherland in *Melancholia*, but Dafoe’s character in *Antichrist* fits the bill just as well. There’s another horribly rationalistic doctor, a Swede, in *The Kingdom*, who constantly derides the “Danish scum” he works with (and must treat), for being a disorderly and superstitious lot, if I recall correctly. In any event von Trier hates doctors for their relentlessly modern form of dissecting rationality, which often acts as a disguise for baser drives to power, control, manipulation, and exploitation.

There is a very real sense in which *Antichrist*, as a narrative, is designed as a torture machine to reduce one of these male representatives of “rational thinking” to a shattered and smoldering wreck, humiliated, mutilated, and stripped of his smug

certainities. A similar fate awaits Sutherland's character in *Melancholia*. Meanwhile, the mentally ill protagonist, played by Kirsten Dunst, finds that she is well placed to comfort others as the world ends because her visionary experience of the world has been vindicated, with emphasis. In *Antichrist*, the He character (Dafoe) is actually more of a would-be doctor, a therapist who thinks he knows better than the real doctor what is best for the suffering person (Gainsbourg's She). She's on to him from the beginning, even before they depart for the woods, when she begs him to "trust others to be smarter than you." Instead, he convinces her to flush her pills — a classically misguided way to treat mental illness, and, in fact, one that is more characteristic of people suffering from mental illness themselves. He then drags her out to the woods, the very place that she says frightens her the most. A special place in Hell awaits him, and, for that, an *Antichrist* is required.

So this, then, is some kind of course of cognitive therapy and New Age-guided meditations that are supposed to replace all medication and provide the answers for moving beyond her clinical depression and pathological grief about the loss of their child. Dafoe's character likes to talk about "scientific fact" but he is more of a zealot for self-hypnosis. His American psychobabble is extraordinarily precise and carries the ill logic of rhyming advertising jingles: "What the mind can conceive and believe it can achieve." Later, he claims that "your thoughts distort reality." This type of "logic" that places the source of all illnesses in the patient's mind is reversed and refuted by the film itself. Instead of being purely subjective, reality indeed appears to be liable to distortion from thoughts in this world of the enchanted forest. Or something like that. For his arrogance He is almost put into a Dantean Hell of Contrapasso in which He is forced to experience her illness. He is made to see and feel the world as She experiences it when she is ill. The film transfers her sickness to him, one might say.

At the climax, he undergoes that panic attack you mentioned that is intercut with images of hers. It is at that moment when Satan, if he exists, triumphs. The *Antichrist* has succeeded. The precise nature of that success is deeply disturbing and intellectually fascinating. The devil has won by convincing Him to kill Her. In order to do that, He must accept, on some level, the “truth” of Her thesis on *Gynocide*. He previously mocked her thesis specifically for its misogyny. In the film, *Gynocide* involves her theory that the women killed in the witch trials really were, or might have been, actual witches. When He strangles her, he is assenting, in essence, to her thesis and destroying a creature he regards as a witch. (He burns her body.) How delectably sinister, from the “satanic” perspective, this course of action is! The devil, if he exists, has induced a healer to kill his patient, violating the letter and the spirit of any healing profession. That is despair distilled.

So the job of the devil is to convince Dafoe to commit murder on the basis of his conclusion about the devil’s real existence. Extraordinary to contemplate this thought-pretzel. If he does not truly believe that a demon has possessed his wife’s soul, and if he does not accept her premise that “someone must die” when the “Three Beggars” (the fox, the deer, and the black bird) appear, there is no reason for him to kill her. It is here that von Trier offers what amounts to a scandalous counter-historical reading of the witch trials — one that is not “serious” but nevertheless remains intriguing. All those witches really might have been witches, this line of thought would run, but *even if this were true* the figures who truly did the devil’s bidding were the witch-hunters themselves, who slaughtered their fellow human beings, often for extremely petty crimes, on thin evidence, after horrifying tortures, and so on. The “crimes” committed by witches, such as they were, were often banal, and, in more cases than not, these so-called “crimes” involved healing or other small acts of decency. But the crimes committed against witches were truly diabolical.

Imagine, for a moment, the trial of Dafoe's character for his wife's murder. "The devil was inside her!" as a defense, offers about the same mitigation as "The devil made me do it!" That is, none at all, especially by the standards of modern liberal reason. He himself claimed to adhere to at the beginning of the film. So Dafoe has merely prioritized his form of madness over hers. That is the specific madness and the specific evil of the witch-hunter. The film may not be as simplistically misogynist as it seems. Although its claim on the "womanly" tendency towards the irrational appears stereotypical and objectionable, that claim is the one with which the film (and the filmmaker) ultimately side with against the "male" forces of reason. (Von Trier demarcates both *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* in a somewhat similar fashion, creating two more compelling Joan of Arc-like characters in the process.) All this probably works better as a negative critique of one half of the equation than it does as a positive proposition about the other. And of course it relies on the biological essentialism that it partly criticizes, down to the film's allegorical names for "He" and "She," as if there were no other kinds of humans, and as if the equation itself were really binary.

At this point it would be remiss not to mention another classic Danish filmmaker, Benjamin Christensen, whose 1922 film *Häxan*, an early silent film masterpiece, took up the subjects of witchcraft and mental illness. Christensen's theory was that many of the symptoms that were mistaken for witchcraft in the premodern era resembled mental illness—various neuroses and hysterias. The film became notorious for the reason that its often gruesome depictions of witchcraft—a coven assembles to devour a baby—and its direct portrayal of torture were both pretty extreme. (I think *Häxan* wound up being banned in several countries.) Christensen's film mixed documentary and dramatic "reconstructions" of witchcraft (the director played the devil, speaking of cinematic Antichrists!) with a sort of illustrated lecture format. The result is, on the surface, a positivist, confident document about modern rationality's ability to

explain all previously mysterious phenomena. It is rather similar in its jaunty self-assurance to Defoe's character's attitude at the beginning of *Antichrist*. At least some of the materials from Gainsbourg's *Gynocide* thesis look similar — or even might have been taken from — the depictions of torture in *Häxan*.

So there are some “Scandi” concerns and sensibilities operating here in the magnetic fields between the overlapping influences of Christensen and Dreyer on von Trier, perhaps. I do find it interesting that von Trier is essentially reversing the polarity of Christensen's classic by offering a fiction in which mental illness melds with supernatural irruptions. This forms a direct challenge to modern rationalist discourse exemplified by the voiceover of *Häxan*, while aligning itself more directly with the solidarity towards the irrational at the core of *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. One of von Trier's core convictions as an artist involves a thoroughgoing critique of modernity, in general, and of the disenchanting process of instrumental reason at the heart of modern life, with its maladaptive, violent, and self-destructive tendencies, in particular. Impulses and processes from which he cannot exclude or excuse himself.

The standard Weberian line on “the central dynamic of modernity” encompasses “systematization, instrumentalization, secularization, demystification” and “de-magification” (*Entzauberung*), according to Jane Bennett's insightful summary, “Modernity and its Critics.” Von Trier's films pulse with awareness of what Bennett calls the very high “cost” of a “rationalized world stripped of all ‘mysterious incalculable forces’” and the “*meaningless* world” that results. Cinema is the right medium for conjuring these things back into view precisely because of its paradoxical qualities of erasing distinctions between illusion and reality, dream and waking life, documentation and embellishment of the world out there and the visionary experience that cannot be pinned down to a purely subjective or interior private variety of experience.

Would it be fair to say that von Trier would rather face a universe that is malevolent than dead and meaningless? This is an intriguing idea precisely because it does not seek to re-enchant the world on the basis of a New Age or therapeutic ecology, a gentle wondering Christian mysticism, a Buddhist embrace of infinitely divine complexity, or any other such positive reversal of secular certainties. But then I do not feel when I am watching von Trier's films that he is presenting a view of life as it should be or as he would prefer it to be. Nor do I sense that he wishes his viewers to leave the cinema thinking that they've seen life as it is, at least not for most of us. Instead, to invoke yet another Scandi artist, I get a strong Edvard Munch vibe from von Trier, as if I'm seeing that suffering skull-face radiating its pain from the inside out into the world — leaking, visible suffering coextensive with the universe itself — in the 1893 painting displayed with the German title *Der Schrei der Natur* (*The Scream of Nature*). (Or is the figure attempting to block out the hell everywhere around it? Either way, the inside is the outside.) Munch wrote of “blood and tongues of fire above the blue-black fjord and the city” in a note on the painting. “My friends walked on, and I stood there trembling with anxiety, and I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature.” Chaos reigns! Some scholars link the painting biographically to Munch's mentally ill sister, Laura, who apparently was in an asylum near the geographical scene depicted in the painting.

It's tempting to reduce the complexity of *Antichrist* to a depiction of the filmmaker's well-documented bouts of extreme mental illness. The film's genesis as a therapeutic experiment that von Trier undertook after a breakdown provides the kind of classic dodge that forms a specialty of artists who live to provoke. But this interpretation sells the film short by limiting its scope to autobiography or a mere byproduct of the process of artistic research into the worst things one can imagine.

I guess I'm not really sure whether von Trier “means it” or not when he dedicates his picture to Tarkovsky, the great religious



artist of postwar Russian cinema. Or what he means by it. Or if he knows what he means by it. (Not that this diminishes the work, at all.) Tarkovsky's world is alive with "mysterious incalculable forces," but ones that generally feel divine rather than satanic. One exception I can think of in Tarkovsky's work, however, might be one that bears on von Trier's. When the rain begins to fall inside the house of the protagonist in *Solaris*, one is reminded that the world Kris Kelvin inhabits at the end of the film is a fabrication created by the planet Solaris, which has generated a world for him to live inside that is a warped misfashioning of his own memories. For Kelvin, the inside is outside, literally.

When the acorns fall on the roof of the house in the woods in *Antichrist*, it signals the advent of a waking nightmare in which the outside world, as experienced by the protagonists, is one that seems to be conjured from the contents of their own ill heads. It's as if both Tarkovsky and von Trier took up Descartes's idea of a "great deceiver" who can manipulate our perceptions of reality and trick us into believing that a fictional world is real. A metaphor for the cinema if there ever was one!

When I'm watching a film by von Trier, I'm often reminded of Marlowe's devil in *Doctor Faustus* and that memorable phrase I quoted before, vis-à-vis Malick, "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it." It's insufficient to deflate the power of the experience of von Trier's films by limiting them to a distancing commentary on the subjective experience of mental illness. (Or a revenge fantasy about torturing yet another doctor character....) To call this a variety of religious experience feels like blasphemy, but I think that specific form of blasphemy is more or less what's intended by von Trier. For Descartes, I think, God's goodness and omnipotence bankrolls his confidence in his ability to generate a clear and distinct picture of the world and the self by thinking through the *cogito ergo sum*. It is this Cartesian world — the grid of reason — that von Trier utterly rejects, positing instead the disturbing idea that a great deceiver is far from impossible and

that the world's "mysterious incalculable forces" might not all be in our minds and, in fact, might be out to get us. Or maybe not — maybe it's all fiction, smoke and mirrors, magic lantern tricks and an evening's entertainment brought to you by movie magic and effects that the filmmaker knows full well aren't real, in part because he himself is the great deceiver of his audience. Everything depends on one's answer to the question without an answer: Who, in the film, is the "*Antichrist*" referred to in the title?

I worry that you won't like this reading of the film, but I'm not invested in needing to "win" an argument over a work of art that resists any master-key interpretation. Does everything boil down to the well-worn comment about the devil's greatest trick?

From your friend JMT

*P.S. Here's a view from the area of the church in central Pilsen. The agitated man we encountered at the entrance to the church spat out the English words "I know Satan" when we refused to give him money. Meanwhile, a local wedding was in full swing.*



April 10, 2020, 12:50 PM

Josh,

I'm gonna return, for a moment, to a sort of tricky Wittgensteinian move I was trying to make a few letters back. I would like to sneak out of the whole Realism and Film debate by simply stating that films are real. They are reality. So, we don't have to worry about how they "hook up" with a reality that is, supposedly, out there somewhere. Films are simply part of the overall collection of things that exist in the real world. Point being, it is all real. The question then becomes "what's the deal with this reality that completely surrounds us? How do we want to be in it?" rather than, "How do we get access, through our sensual apparatus, or by means of this or that medium, to this thing called reality that can somehow be isolated from other things that aren't quite real." The skeptical problem dissolves when you simply grant everything full reality, including all the so-called fictions we've created.

But another big problem emerges. And the second problem is the one that I think Lars von Trier tackles. The second problem goes like this: Okay, films are just as much reality as anything else. But films are also tricks, games, fictions, put-ons. So, if films are reality, does that mean that reality is like a film, all the way down? Is everything we are doing here more or less an empty and pointless game, the rules of which are utterly arbitrary and the punchline always something like a sick joke? I take all of von Trier's experiments in film to be just that, experiments with this deeply unsettling thesis in order to see what happens. He's genuinely curious. And he's just screwed up enough as a person to have the stomach to push reality, in the form of film, as far as he can push it. I like your Cartesian analogy for that reason. You're right. It is like a Cartesian thought experiment except that in von Trier's case the experiment is with the very material of reality itself. That's to say, by making films he gets to create little realities in which his various insane propositions

play themselves out in real time. In *Melancholia*, for instance, he gets to destroy the entire earth in a random cosmic act and find out whether it matters or not. Does the prospect of complete erasure, total eradication render everything else moot? Do we only ever get up in the morning because of some deeply held but basically inarticulate sense of eschatology? It is going somewhere, even if we know not where, so we can trudge forward for another day. But take that away and what happens? So von Trier takes it away. And what happens? I guess that depends on how you watch the film.

Clearly, von Trier has no simple one-to-one idea of what movies are supposed to show us about the world. But his Dogme 95 period is, I think, crucially important, especially since aspects of Dogme Realism are a huge part of *Antichrist* and of really every movie he has made since then.

Here, for instance, is some of what von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg wrote about Dogme 95:

Today a technological storm is raging of which the result is the elevation of cosmetics to God. By using new technology anyone at any time can wash the last grains of truth away in the deadly embrace of sensation. The illusions are everything the movie can hide behind.

DOGME 95 counters the film of illusion by the presentation of an indisputable set of rules known as THE VOW OF CHASTITY.

Amazing to me that they call it a “vow of chastity” by the way. Here’s a clear relation between the Dogme 95 movement and the path of the religious mystics and ascetics who, precisely by renouncing a frivolous relationship to reality, sought to put themselves into deeper contact with the Real. The whole point of the Dogme 95 movement was to say that movies have a special responsibility vis-à-vis truth. The manifesto says this quite

explicitly. Those who sign up to do a Dogme film are supposed to make the following pledge:

My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings. I swear to do so by all the means available and at the cost of any good taste and any aesthetic considerations.

I'd call this a fair summary of exactly what I mean by mystical realism. And I'd say that exactly such a truth comes out in what I consider to be my favorite of the Dogme 95 films, *In Your Hands* by Annette Olesen. The whole point of that film, to my mind, is to ask the basic question, "how much do we really believe in what we are experiencing?" The main character of the film is a pastor at a women's prison. But she is a pastor who, when confronted with the true weirdness, the depths of possible forgiveness, the uncanny and profoundly disturbing nature of reality itself, pulls back in unbelief. This is a movie about the fact that you have to be able to have faith in the world exactly as it presents itself, which is to say as a place in which brute reality and strange shards of redemption exist side by side. You have to have faith and you have to actively choose the path of the suffering that truth requires or it all falls apart.

Maybe another way to put it is this, if you live with eyes fully open then every single thing is totally and completely shocking in every single way. Movies can have the wonderful effect of bringing the intensity of this basic fact right up into our faces. Von Trier, to my mind, has understood this fact from day one. It is what all his movies are about. This is true Realism. And if movies are not about that, if movies are not up to the task of true Realism, then to hell with them. Seriously, to hell with them. That, I take it, is how von Trier views film and the attitude from which he makes his films.

I think that this is exactly what von Trier is up to in *The Five Obstructions*. Actually, I think the *The Five Obstructions* is key. But I guess I want to stop here first and ask what you think about

*The Five Obstructions* and how you view it. Because, in a sense, the conversation can't go on until we get that film straight. So, gimme your take on it and we'll go from there.

warmly,

morgan

April 13, 2020, 9:57 AM

Dear Morgan,

I wonder if our letter-writing has prepared us in some ways for the absence and isolation that marks the way we live now during the pandemic. All good wishes to you and Stefany in Detroit. I also wonder how this moment will change me. Having not heard from you about our book last month I became worried that it seemed like a trivial pursuit or that you were encountering difficulties. I'm reminded of an *Onion* headline from after 9/11, "Nation Yearns to Care about Stupid Shit Again." I'm not sure if writing about movies matters any more but I'll take my distractions where I can get them, and it's good to be in touch, my friend.

You know, von Trier does have an early film from the late 1980s called *Epidemic*, but it is not available to stream and I'm not convinced I would want to watch it now, when thousands are dying each day, even if I could. And I have little interest in asking a delivery driver to risk their life to bring me a DVD copy of a film with that title, which would be a grotesque abuse of privilege, I think.

I did, however, have a chance to watch von Trier's most recent release, *The House That Jack Built*. Immured in the desert of its charmlessness I felt something new — von Trier was wasting my time (and, a far worse sin, wasting the time of Matt Dillon, Bruno Ganz, and Uma Thurman, whose cameo ends abruptly with a tire jack in the face, recapitulating perfectly how this movie makes the viewer feel). I seriously wanted to pack it in, stop writing about movies, stop teaching film, stop watching movies forever. Calgon, take me away!

Now that this feeling has passed, I do think there is something notable about *The House That Jack Built*. Near the end of the film, the serial killer protagonist played by Dillon finally finds

himself face to face with Ganz, Wim Wenders's famous angel in *Wings of Desire* and the movie Hitler of *Downfall*. Ganz's voice has been with us since the beginning of the picture, speaking offscreen to Dillon's Jack, whose preternatural streak of luck allows him to elude capture by the authorities in eerie ways that suggest the opposite of divine intervention. As the cops finally close in on his corpse-ornamented cold storage room, Dillon is invited by Ganz to descend into a hole in the ground. But this "escape" turns out to be a trap — Ganz is a Virgil-like figure (named "Verge") and Dillon finds himself in a Dantean underground landscape representing Hell.

Jack spouts Nietzschean claptrap, about the superiority of the great artist in a meaningless world in which all is allowed, until the bitter end, while Ganz preaches about how real art can only come from love. Ganz makes a distinction between an architect and an engineer — Jack cannot build his dream house and keeps demolishing it because he is not an artist and cannot create, only destroy. As humorless as the film is (and it must be seen to be believed — mostly it's too dumb even to offend), it's an auteur-theory critic's dream because it's a bad film that nevertheless provides a skeleton key to the rest of von Trier's work.

The filmmaker views himself as a divided soul, half architect and half engineer, half angel and half devil, half Dreyer-Bergman-Tarkovsky remix DJ and half Hitchcock-esque reactionary troll, an elderly *enfant terrible* and bearded baby who makes a meal of provocative cinematic violence but really just wants to express the difficulties of being madly alive in a human skin. He's both figures — a manipulative Dillon-like psycho and the self-described "nazi" who was banned from Cannes, and who keeps getting away with his crimes against good taste, *and* a Ganz-like tour-guide of the darkest circles of Hell. He never intended to endorse anything he represented; he was simply bleeding on the screen to get it out of his head. I think you are right that he yearns to serve some higher power, like Dante, or at least to be a Virgil of the psychological underworld of the bankrupt modern



condition, condemned to Limbo but still illuminating the world with his poetry, one who reveals little panels and scenarios of sinners suffering on our tour of this latter-day *Inferno*. Credits roll as the devil falls into the abyss — cue the song “Hit the Road, Jack” (really!). Von Trier will reform and create his *Purgatorio* and then his *Paradiso*. But, not yet.

The thing is that I don’t fully believe anything von Trier says because he’s so mercurial. Or, rather, to use the standard line of all parents in horror films, I believe that *he* believes it, or at least that he means what he says when he says it. That sounds a little bit harsher than intended, but it’s true that he himself endorsed his own banning from Cannes. A lot of this is self-publicity (which is how I view his DOGME 95 manifesto).

Honestly, I cannot think of a better description of *The House That Jack Built* than what DOGME 95 condemns as the “deadly embrace of sensation” and those “illusions” that “the movie can hide behind.” I’m sure this reversal is deliberative. One might argue that von Trier, in going from one extreme to the other, is testing the limits of cinematic form, stretching the audience’s patience beyond the breaking point, and staking out two contradictory approaches to filmmaking that allow him to explore the antinomies of the medium without synthesizing them.

*The Five Obstructions* does seem to get right to the heart of the matter, yes. By asking Jorgen Leth to remake his 1967 film *The Perfect Human* with various absurd restrictions and seemingly impossible “obstructions” (such as shooting a scene featuring the protagonist eating a meal in Mumbai’s Red-Light District), von Trier paid homage to Leth’s filmmaking. In attempting to obstruct Leth, von Trier simply revealed how inventive he was. (Personally I find Leth’s films to be distastefully obsessed with depicting paying for sex in ways that feel uncomfortably neocolonialist and exploitative. That might be neither here nor there for the purposes of our discussion about *Antichrist*, but it is the

case that sexual misconduct allegations also bind Leth and von Trier.)

In the film's culminating sequence, von Trier finally admits that he has something like a little brother jealousy complex of some kind towards Leth as a filmmaker, and that his devilishly sadistic behavior and childish defiant obstructions are really just his way of expressing his insecurity about the possibility that he is the inferior artist. To me that confession is the real von Trier. He dedicates *Antichrist* to Tarkovsky, who would have despised it, and he speaks to Mark Cousins in *The Story of Film* about Dreyer and Bergman, both of whom knew how to restrain themselves in ways that von Trier has never mastered. As another great Danish writer once wrote, "The more a person limits himself, the more resourceful he becomes." To me that's what's most complex and valuable about his best early film, *Europa*, and his best later work, *Melancholia*. The former is formally constrained by its use of back-projections to represent historical fiction, and therefore becomes a meditation on (among other things) how stories can manipulate their audiences. The latter is narratively limited largely to women's subjectivity as they experience states of severe depression and face down male arrogance about how science will save the world from its inevitable destruction. If *Europa* reveals how optimism can lead to evil, then *Melancholia* reconfigures despair as a form of hope, suggesting a positive role for the mentally ill in comforting the (supposedly) sane as the world collapses around them/us. Timely, no?

Your remark that the function of DOGME 95 was to renounce a "frivolous relationship to reality" in order to establish "deeper contact with the Real" caught my eye. I think what's clear, from rewatching *The Five Obstructions*, *Antichrist*, and *The House That Jack Built*, as well as *Europa* and *Melancholia*, is that von Trier has gradually rejected the notion that any particular film style can provide a unique access point to truth. In other words, it's not the presence or absence of this or that method of lighting, type of film, method of filming, or narrative genre (DOGME

banned “superficial action,” specifically, “murder”!) that brings a work of cinema into deeper contact with life. We see this in *The Five Obstructions*, in which it matters not whether Leth films in Cuba or India, with animation or with a split screen, or using shots no longer than 12 frames. Cinema is only what one makes of it, and DOGME was, at its best, a useful “obstruction” for its time that opened new avenues of creativity with its limits and restrictions, in much the same way that a modern poet might use a limiting form like a sonnet or a haiku. The issue is not one of a lack of artifice being closer to the truth than an overload of artifice. It’s about the poetry.

So it’s not that all is an empty demonstration of surface appearance, phoniness, and illusion. One does adhere to one’s vision and inevitably one projects one’s personality into the frame. And certainly I agree with you that film (or any work of art that has value) becomes a part of the world and in that sense is not separate from reality. Roy Armes, in his wonderful 1974 out-of-print book *Film and Reality*, discusses realism in film in a threefold sense. He describes how documentary impulses draw filmmakers to represent the social world out there, how narrative impulses draw filmmakers to add new variations to established storytelling genres deeply embedded in the cultural imagination, and how experimental impulses draw filmmakers to question the nature of reality as most people see it.

I take von Trier, for the most part, to be one of the last category of filmmakers, an artist who wishes to ask his viewers whether there are “more things” than are dreamt of in their philosophy. It’s not that the mad, the visionary, the marginalized, the saintly, the poor, the abused, the disabled, or the criminal among us have any more perfect bead on truth. It’s that their story of the world is also valid and disrupts the smug certainties of modern secular liberalism. In this manner, Weberian de-magicification continues to unravel in the 21st century on all sides of the cultural and political spectrum as all that is solid melts into air. This process seems to be accelerating as we speak. Von Trier’s films

reveal how this process of undoing the secular world is very far from being necessarily wonderful or moral, but instead also contains nightmare possibilities for depravity and abjection. After all, it was von Trier who recognized in the idea of “America” these twin dangers: the figure of the neo-nazi terrorist “Werewolf” in *Europa*, the precursor of today’s white nationalist, and the oppressively tyrannical self-help New Age liberal therapist in *Antichrist*, the representative figure of the hapless prosperous society bereft of any spiritual defenses whatsoever against violent outbursts of darkness.

I think that is one reason why polite conversation often steers clear of von Trier. It’s sometimes unbearable for decent people to endure his films. I myself don’t even want to talk about his work right now, yet I feel compelled to do so, because he speaks directly to the nightmare of history from which there is no possibility of awakening. With all that said, I do think that simply attempting to tell the truth as one sees it is an act of hope that rests on faith in some form of futurity.

I badly want that truth and that future to be different. I hope things turn out more like the ending of a film by a different Trier, Joachim. In *Thelma*, Joachim Trier offers a strangely specific antidote to the poisons unloosened by *Antichrist*. It’s a supernatural tale of a queer woman protagonist (Eili Harboe) with telekinetic powers who overcomes her conservative religious family’s belief that she’s possessed by evil. She liberates herself in order to pursue a romantic relationship with her girlfriend Anja (Kaya Wilkins) at university. Having accidentally transported her baby brother with her mental powers to a frozen spot under the ice of a lake near the family home when she was a young girl, Thelma overcomes her childhood guilt and eventually dispatches her fire-and-brimstone preaching father by helping him to spontaneously combust.

Like Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy), Robert Eggers’s protagonist in *The Witch*, the eponymous lead of Thelma suggests the joy

of women's liberation as a happy counter-narrative. Their fates deny the dominant and oppressive narratives of religion as constituted by the historical records of the New England Witch Trials and by the puritanical violence perpetrated against LGBTQIA+ people by the "ecumenical hate" of contemporary evangelical Christianity. Both films have a sort of "would that it were so" attitude towards their pagan supernaturalism that also links them with the less supernatural freedom sought and found in the "devilish woodlands" of polytheism by Dani (Florence Pugh), the protagonist of Ari Aster's *Midsommar*, another women's liberation narrative.

But let's give the devil his due. Von Trier remains admirably stringent in his rejection of any such unmixed positivity in the irruption of deep irrational currents of the mind or in outbursts of otherworldly forces. There are no answers here, and the solutions chosen by Thelma, Thomasin, and Dani are to be seen for what they are, wish fulfillments that please their audiences by providing ways out and hints about futures that might be worth inhabiting. Von Trier offers no such succor to the viewer. He hasn't gotten there and maybe he never will. Maybe it's just his foul temperament or maybe it's his most valuable quality as an artist — the same quality that might make his company unbearable and his films insufferable. Even at their most wretched and objectionable, these works of art disallow any comfortable resting point. They're still modern and I think they are fundamentally opposed to liberal subjectivity, particularly the ideals of autonomy and free choice that our culture values.

Von Trier fits the old definition of humanism ascribed to Terence, "I am human and nothing human is foreign to me." This is the bitter taste of knowledge that comes from that other Tree not mentioned in the title of Malick's 2011 film. How fitting for our ruinous and fatal moment in which leadership is depraved, science has been rendered useless and degraded by an avalanche of lies, technological progress seems to be a dangerous vehicle traveling fast in reverse, and the whole edifice of individualism

and capitalism appears to be clinging by its fingernails to the edge of an abyss. Maybe it's best to let go, but there's no map for this long fall. I would prefer to think that more humane alternatives are viable in rebuilding from this wreckage. But in the event that this nightmare only deepens, it will provide more evidence, if more is needed, that von Trier speaks urgently to the state of things. I hope everything will look different and much better in a few months or a year, but for now I'd like to record these notes in situ and simply say, with the Beach Boys, that God only knows.

*The Tree of Life* and *Antichrist* were released within two years of one another, but in fact Malick's film was sold to distributors in the same season of stock market boom (Spring 2009) that von Trier's was released. Malick's critical romanticism feels more in tune with the Obama years of recovery from the financial crisis than von Trier's sour notes of acid pessimism. One of these two films nearly doubled its money. The other lost millions of dollars, and yet probably feels truer to the spirit of our times than the Pre-Crash era — seemingly now vanished forever — in which it was created. With uncanny precision, the unrelenting horror of *Antichrist* fits the dimensions of this year's Easter of plague, mass death, and empty churches, from which the deep story of reawakening or rebirth has never been more welcome.

Notes from your friend JMT

*P.S. In a search for hope and beauty, I attach an image of happier days — a photo of you and Stefany enjoying an afternoon of art and conversation in your adopted city from my visit to Detroit.*



April 30, 2020, 11:24 AM

Josh,

Well, I guess I'm not gonna watch *The House That Jack Built* right now. Not, maybe, because I am depressed or don't want to face the ugliness of it. I'm actually not depressed. The world that COVID-19 is destroying right now is not my world. I've already let it go. Years ago I let it go. I'm in another place. In a funny way, the machinations of COVID-19 have simply brought a lot more of the people out there into the world I'm already living in, here. But these are thoughts that I'm not sure make sense to anyone who hasn't already died to the world. Dying to the world is a spiritual exercise and you don't do it for fun, let's just say. You do it because you have to. But once you've done it, however deeply or definitively you've done it, you realize that you can't go back. And you also realize that you haven't stopped loving the world or being part of it. It's just that everything has changed, because you have, in some important way, died. I know, now, a little bit about what the ancients meant when they said that living is learning how to die. I'm learning how to die. I've learned, a little bit, how to die. In some important way, I'm dead.

I do feel weary of talking about von Trier right now, though, and I don't want to watch any more of his films for the moment. I think you summed the main points up nicely. I have nothing to add.

The only thing that still sticks in my mind is the letter that von Trier writes as if Leth wrote it and then has Leth read it to him at the end of *The Five Obstructions*. Actually, I don't own a copy of the film and I can't find the text of the letter online. So, I'm just going from my memory of the culminating scene. But the point, sort of as you've said in your last letter, is that von Trier has been fighting with himself all along. I don't think that letter is just another trick or game. Somehow, it took all this obfuscation finally to confront the problem of the root shame and embar-



rassment and utterly exposed, vulnerable just being-a-person that is at the root of making anything at all, doing anything at all. Why do something instead of nothing? This is the practical corollary, and, one could say, the ethical dimension of the core metaphysical question why is there something and not nothing. I remember being genuinely stunned when Leth reads that letter at the end of the movie.

All of this is linked, I want to say, to this imperative that we must learn how to die. And the mystery embedded in this imperative of learning to die is that learning to die can't be done without it being, simultaneously, the discovery of how to live. The films of Lars von Trier are, to me, tackling this problem, they are this problem. So, that's enough. That's more than enough.

And so I'm happy to put him away for now.

warmly,

morgan

May 5, 2020, 12:50 PM

Dear Morgan,

It sounds like you are in an interesting place, my friend — and I don't just mean Detroit! By any chance are you writing about the territory covered in St. Paul's letter to the Galatians? I note a similarity in phrasing between what you are saying here and Galatians 6: "the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." It's interesting, too, about "the world" and what this concept might mean, in terms of "having a world," "being in the world," "renouncing the world," "building a world," or, as you write, seeing "the world" destroyed. This conceptual framework often takes on a dualistic, world-denying critique, which in my opinion is just too easy. Those aspects of "the world" — viewed in an Early Christian sense as the realm of sin and fallenness ruled by human wickedness — we would all like to do without, like Amazon.com, far from being destroyed, are only triumphing from this nightmare of destruction and plague, no? I think you mean something else here, perhaps the destruction of certain bourgeois platitudes or consumerist conceptions of long life through dietary supplements and mindfulness? (They'll be back....)

I take heart from the fact that you say that you haven't stopped loving the world or stopped wanting to be a part of it — spoken like a good mystical realist, indeed. What I like most about hearing your remarks is that when I combine them with what I know about how you're living, I feel a sense of delight (and even pride, if I might that use, strange as it sounds) in your chosen path of service in your church, your community, and your city, and in your honest way of relating to your art students through non-B.S. mentoring as they attempt to navigate this impossible landscape and put their chips down on art in a "world" that discourages and warps this impulse in every possible way. What an intrepid and lovely generation, "these children that you spit on as they try to change their world," as Bowie sings. And all of

this is, of course, inseparable from your faith and represents the truth of what the Buddhists call “right livelihood.”

Galatians is one of those self-reflexive points in Paul’s writing where he pauses to describe the writing process itself: “See with what large letters I am writing to you in my own hand!” Now we’re exchanging our own letters about a film, *The Five Obstructions*, in which the reading out of a letter reveals von Trier’s view of his art by means of an epistle. That’s a good place to close one loop in our exchanges. Yet — sorry/not sorry — I am not ready to let go of this film, this *Antichrist*, that I find so haunting, disturbing, upsetting, objectionable, and compelling, for reasons probably best described in terms of abjection by Julia Kristeva (see below). What is a genuine work of art but something that cannot be unseen or undone — even one that you sometimes wish you had never seen?

It’s interesting that in Galatians Paul is fighting with some of his friends via one of his many futile-sounding letter-writing campaigns attempting remotely to sort out all of the confusion and bad behavior that his radically egalitarian ideas had sown across pockets of the Mediterranean. By what authority did he presume to speak? What a madman! How did he know, to an absolute certainty, that he wasn’t wrong? He dared to suggest that because the words of the prophets were about to be fulfilled, so too their assertions needed to be taken seriously that anyone and everyone anywhere on earth could share in inheriting the Kingdom of God. Regardless of their class, their ethnicity, their gender, or, even their religion (or lack of religion, in a specific sense?). A mind-boggling assertion from which the world has never recovered, and over which all of us are still arguing (even if we don’t know it), and over which many are fighting, for good or ill.

Anyway, some of the Galatians want their religious community to be circumcised, apparently to avoid persecution of some kind. Paul (himself a self-described former persecutor of Christians)

would have been circumcised but, unlike von Trier and Dafoe were said to have done on the set of *Antichrist*, he doesn't show everyone his supposedly authoritative whang. Instead, he writes that it is immaterial to make a "good appearance in the flesh" but he also makes clear that not getting circumcised doesn't solve one's problems, either. It doesn't matter to Jesus. Yeah, why would it? God is not a bouncer at a supposedly exclusive club with a list of names and plus ones. None of that matters anymore to Paul. Only a "new creation" matters.

\* \* \*

I suppose that any artist's most basic calling, too, is to place the value of new creation above that of making a good appearance and avoiding persecution. But what are we to do with these problematic older lions like von Trier who pace their cages and really draw blood whenever they're let out? Like you I also want to put him down, but I cannot, because he offers us no quarter, and no answers, only a host of troubling questions that spiral down into the vertigo of film history and the most basic functions of movies as a medium. Von Trier cannot go along to get along. He must say and show the wrong things. This is the painful, shameful process that you describe as integral to his view of cinema. Here is the anti-Paul of *Antichrist*, writing with a thesis so hideous and foul that he must ascribe it to a fictional character.

In *The Five Obstructions*, von Trier puts emphasis on Leth as a fellow "wretch" who is "abject," which might invoke another figure from a Pauline epistle, the "wretched man" of Romans 7. That's one of the most fascinating chapters in Paul's letters. Here, Paul makes his most startlingly honest confession: "For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Von Trier in a nutshell!

I rewatched the scene you're describing in *The Five Obstructions*. It's in the final seven minutes of the film. Yes, what von Trier has

done there is to write a script for Leth to read in the final “obstructed” version of *The Perfect Human*. Meanwhile, von Trier presents his own edit of Leth going about his filmmaking tasks and daily life (including what appears to be a visit to a doctor). In this nested series of self-reflective moves, as you say, there’s a letter that appears to be from Leth to von Trier, but which is, in fact, written by von Trier. I agree that this is a critical moment that reveals something basic about the artist.

The script reads:

*Dear Lars, thank you for your obstructions. They’ve shown me what I really am, an abject, human human. I try to fool the world because I don’t want to be part of it. My trick is cheap and I repeat it endlessly. If I go on telling the viewer what I see—like a prisoner of war repeating his name and number—without adding anything, emotions are too dangerous—the world and I will fall for it. I call it art—but I am certain that I cannot do a thing. I only do all this so that I can put up with myself. My films are a bluff. A hideaway, Lars. Thank you for chastising me so lovingly! Was that nice? Does it make any difference? Maybe you put words into other people’s mouths to get out of saying them yourself.*

The script goes on:

*The dishonest person was you, Lars. You only saw what you wanted to see. The skepticism you felt about yourself must go for me, too. But you exposed yourself. You wanted to make me human, but that’s what I am! You got me to play along but you let me get on the defensive. As we all know, it’s the attacker who really exposes himself. The truth is, you got it wrong! I obstructed you, no matter how much you wanted the opposite. And you fell flat on your face. How does the perfect human fall? This is how the perfect human falls.*

That last line is accompanied by a sequence of Leth dropping to the floor, seemingly exhausted, in order to watch television in a bedroom. Leth, then, is the “perfect” human, for von Trier, because he is a wretched and abject “human human,” flawed and vile, the person who does not understand their own actions and makes art in a failed, repetitive attempt to “put up” with themselves. I wish I had a better translation of this line: “I call it art — but I am certain that I cannot do a thing.” What is the opposite of one saint writing to another? That’s probably nearer to the heart of the matter.

\* \* \*

I see von Trier, especially in *Antichrist* and *Melancholia*, reaching back into the history of cinema to invoke abjection in Christensen, Dreyer, and Bergman. In light of their films, we cannot accept the contemporary consumer premise that art must be nice. Or that good art makes for good people. Or that only good, stable, normal, hygienic, ethical people make good art. This new theory bears no relationship with the history of art, or with reality, unfortunately.

I think some viewers wish to shield themselves from abjection in art because they already find themselves immured in an abject world of necropolitics and economic ruin from which they seek relief and escape. Fair! What they might not realize, however, is that gulping down artistic saccharine and bingeing on cinematic comfort food probably is not going to help — it’s only going to harden their emotional arteries and line their brain synapses with conceptual plaque.

There’s another set of viewers who seem drawn to abjection in a variety of interesting ways, through horrifying and effective cult productions like *Twin Peaks: The Return*, *Most Beautiful Island*, *Mandy*, *You Were Never Really Here*, *The Lighthouse*, *Midsommar*, *In Fabric*, and even popular blockbusters like *Joker*, perhaps

as some sort of coping or release mechanism for the onslaught of vileness in public life.

I think it's mistaken to attempt to assign an ideology to these films based on their content or the ethics of their creators. As a mode of criticism, this is very low-hanging fruit at best. Instead, I see these films as serving an even more basic purgative function in the collective unconscious, acknowledging that the waking world now often seems like a nightmare. *Antichrist* forms an important precursor to this 21st-century series in which "chaos reigns" and the sleep of reason breeds monsters.

Obviously I belong to this second set of viewers and I consider myself a friend of horror, but I recognize that these pictures are not for everyone. To me, however, these films feel like homeopathy, fighting like with like — admittedly similar in their absurdity to some ancient medieval remedy in which one buries oneself up to the neck in dung to escape from ill vapors. These movies perform their spells best when they are understood to be theatrical constructions, surreal fabrications that allow one to explore the worst that can happen from a slight distance, refracting dreams through distorting mirrors rather than attempting to portray any superficially "accurate" or "plausible" set of circumstances. In a therapeutic sense, then, I value what I take to be the Expressionist elements of make-believe and play in these devilishly delicious confections because, like the works of Edvard Munch, Jean Cocteau, or Maya Deren, they reveal the complexity or even the unaccountable/unacceptable nature of the inner world. When the world's tyranny of niceties and etiquette reaches the level of demanding that we control our dreams or stop our mouths from honestly telling how it feels to us to be alive, we must revolt. And sometimes be revolting.

In doing this work, cinema that is formally disruptive and deliberately unreal erodes the bourgeoisie claims of psychological realism and the generic platitudes about morality in the arts that mark the publishing and entertainment industries and the

social media discourse that now drives them like the proverbial mix-up about the horse and the carriage. At its best, this newish micro-trend for horror fights on three fronts simultaneously: It stands against socialist realism's moralizing cant about upbuilding political progress through the arts, against psychological realism's narcissistic cant about the wholesomeness of liberal subjectivity, and against capitalist realism's cant about the need for entrepreneurial pleasantness, civility, cleanliness, and compromise in a world gone mad.

Instead, the art of abjection, when viewed from a safer space, performs some of the functions ascribed to the concept by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*. The book opens with a quotation from Victor Hugo that also feels apt to von Trier in general and *Antichrist* in particular: "No Beast is there without glimmer of infinity / No eye so vile nor abject that brushes not / Against lighting from on high, now tender, now fierce." An all-important capitalization here, since, like von Trier's talking fox, the animal is perhaps being raised into the figure of *The* "Beast." When I think of *Antichrist* I cannot help thinking of Biblical phrases like "the lord of this world" or "the prince of the power of the air."

Kristeva begins:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. [...] What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object — that of being opposed to I.

Yes, this is almost precisely the timbre of *Antichrist*, as well, and, I must add that, after reading Kristeva describing corpses, feces, vomit, and decay, I feel more phlegmatic about getting to grips with von Trier in a less squeamish manner. Some combination



of psychoanalytic and religious thinking may prove good guides for exploring the particular appeal or calling of abjection and horror. Something European (for lack of a better word for it) and anti-utilitarian is going on here at the core and one begins to feel somewhat childish and puritanically American in its ancient presence. Did we really think we were safe from history, with its mass graves, torture, persecution, plagues, or that we were permanently inoculated by modern medical science and industrial supply chains from the experiences inflicted on everyone else for centuries? That there would be no return of the repressed? No Trump? Like Max von Sydow says in his guided meditation-style voiceover near the beginning of von Trier's eponymous film, "You are going deeper into Europa."

I remember visiting the Isenheim altarpiece in Colmar and thinking that Matthias Grünewald's depiction of the dead and diseased Christ with his suppurating wounds worked well on me as an object of reflection. I thought to myself, rather stupidly: Well, this is not American art! And: Huh, yeah, I guess death is inevitable, better get rolling with what really matters! Grünewald's iconography was a tribute to the monks of St. Anthony who treated and also may have suffered from plague and fungus-poisoned rye. I also read that ergotism, the illness caused by this type of infected grain, may have played a role in the Salem witch trials, where the symptoms of convulsions, vertigo, tinnitus, and hallucinations were similar, according to some medical scholars. In any event, this way of making art through the depiction of abjection survives in contemporary consumer society mainly in the horror-tinged films like Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day*, with its flesh-eating epidemic, and von Trier's treatment of crime in *The Element of Crime*, of self-harm and mental illness in *Antichrist*, and of debilitating depression in *Melancholia*.

Like Grünewald's paintings, von Trier's films are designed for the audience to identify with the sufferers. But, also like the Isenheim Altarpiece, they compel the modern viewer's resist-

ance and objection to the upside-down notion that suffering is somehow divine (and, therefore, in some sense, *deserved*, or a special marker of an especially deserving person, a misery-inducing thought from either a secular or a religious perspective). This, above all, is the aspect of von Trier's work that disturbs liberals, especially those who would like to consider themselves allies of women and minorities who have been told this rationale for their oppression all their lives and are over and done with all that. I think von Trier intends his films as fictionalized autobiographies of the "I am Madame Bovary" variety. That's why I think *Melancholia* remains his masterpiece, since Kirsten Dunst's character Justine *is* von Trier and since the film proposes a positive place or role in the world for the mentally ill person who has enough privilege and autonomy to console others when the world falls to pieces, rather than punishing them simply for existing. I sympathize with those who find in von Trier's films only an appropriative or trolling gaze — don't watch it, then! — even if I assert my own wish to see things differently. I might be wrong.

\* \* \*

With von Trier we seem to have landed on the diametrically opposite side of contemporary cinema from Malick. I would like to see the wonders and horrors in their films, respectively, as poles on the same globe that cannot balance properly without the existence of both extremities. I see no possibility of synthesis between their two viewpoints, or, to further mix up my metaphors, I don't think that this is a case of two lenses on the world that would create some clearer view through binocular vision if they were ever brought together. No, they are prime lenses, if you will, ones that affix to the same camera body.

Either way, we have two hedgehog filmmakers here, modern artists of repetition who are making the same film over and over again in many different variations and styles. Malick and von Trier are themselves visual artifacts of the analogue era

who have carried over their persistence of vision into the digital realm. Their respective aesthetics stood in fierce opposition to the 1990s zeitgeist about “the end of history” and the inevitable victory of liberal capitalism and modernity as defined by technological progress. Now their idiosyncrasies feel prescient.

I think that’s why, even though they can be made to represent the most obnoxious and oppressive aspects of the auteur theory of privileged personal cinema, and despite the obvious fact that their films are artistically incompatible on almost every level, Malick and von Trier still seem so well suited to the mood of the 21st century in their off-kilter productions. Perhaps that is because they, like Matthias Grünewald, went against the grain of their own time.

Is it going too far to claim that Malick and von Trier remain medieval on some level? Maybe that’s a silly comment to make about artists working with the most technology-dependent art-form of all. Or might the cinema be a valid place to seek out resistance to the historical catastrophes of instrumental reason, the mechanized war on the planet, and the “dead eyes” of a disenchanted world?

Please forgive this very long letter, you’ve given me much to consider.

Notes from your friend JMT

May 5, 2020, 4:45 PM

Dear Josh,

I understand your reservations about my “dying to the world” stuff. I also take some pride in your pride for me, especially in my little ministry around Saint Anthony’s here in Detroit. The somewhat absurd game of being Brother Morgan, whoever that is.

But for a moment I’m gonna risk doing damage to that pride. Because I want to hold onto something in that otherwise bad two-world metaphysics of the early Christians and of plenty of other religious folk throughout the ages. The world that you die to in “conversion” is all of the world, not just the bad stuff. You don’t get to pick and choose. I don’t get to pick and choose. Some aspect of dying to the world is about recognizing in a complete and total and shocking way that it is all death. The whole thing goes away. Every part of everything is nothing. None of it has substance. None of it is real. This is the realization. This is the insight.

Of course the mind revolts at the thought. Of course we immediately want to reject the thought and say “yeah, sure, in some sense, but...” But the degree to which one is really transformed by the experience of dying to the world is the degree to which one can hold off the “yeah but” objection. How long can any of us hold it off? How unbearable is the thought?

One of the things I’ve always been drawn to in art of any kind, actually, and in the case of our discussion, in film, is the elegiac. Is it possible to say that all art is elegiac at its core? I suspect that this is true, though I cannot prove this and have no interest in proving it. One either knows this in one’s soul or one doesn’t. All we can really do, in art, is name the thing in its passing. The horrible doomed fragility of everything in its passing is so beautiful

it is beyond words. It is beyond images. Nevertheless, we attach the words and images to mark the passing.

The greatest films, to me, are the films that are somehow adequate to this elegiac mood. Maybe it is just one scene. One moment that justifies all the otherwise pointless scaffolding of plot and character and narrative and whatever else was the excuse to give us one scene of elegiac beauty, to show the beauty of an object or a creature or an experience or a feeling in its passing away and never being again. The incredible overwhelming loss that is at the core of all living.

I've always enjoyed the movie writing of Manny Farber even though some aspect of his, I don't know what to call it, grubby materialism bothers me. But I love that he watches a movie not for the plot or the ideas or anything that normal people look for. He watches a movie with his termite eye, burrowing into scenes just for the weirdness of watching the camera move or the shapes and colors of a scene. He's completely open to the fleeting feelings and jumps of emotion or interest that a movie creates, often despite authorial intention, as you watch it.

There are certain scenes in *Antichrist* that make me feel the creepiness of existence and the sadness of the various attempts to confront the fear and creepiness that is being alive. The horror and the menace of the acorns falling on the roof of the cabin. That is pure horror. The gut feeling that nature is utterly malevolent, satanic to the core. The switched shoes or wrong-footed feet of the dead child. The pathetic scene where Man tries to get Woman to confront her crippling terror and depression and simply walk across a short stretch of ground. I don't want, personally, to construct big arguments about what these scenes mean. They just capture the sense in which existence is horror. Those scenes justify the existence of the film. They are enough.

Lars von Trier has the basic decency to be ashamed of himself for creating such scenes. His decency drives him to further acts

of indecency. He can't help himself. His filmmaking is the filmmaking of anger and distress. His films are a revolt against being alive. This, to me, is a valid form of art. I call it elegiac filmmaking because he creates scenes, in every one of his movies, where one gets the palpable sense that there is no answer in the face of death.

I suppose I could make the very facile point that the great difference between von Trier and Malick is the difference between meeting the terrifying triumph of finitude with anger or with love. Probably it is a difference. And I am glad to be able to say that I frequently have the experience of the universe as an object that is in love with itself, in love even with the reality of constant overwhelming loss. But I also want to say that, in the end, it is not much of a difference.

love,

morgan

May 17, 2020, 1:37 PM

Dear Morgan,

You are really laying down the law with this “it is all death” and “none of it is real” stuff, cheers! :) But I think you also believe that it is all love and that it is all real. To reframe these reflections as a question, how does the artist try to live up to the name of the Buddhist deity, “The Regarder of the Cries of the World”? It starts with accepting suffering as the first truth.

I contemplate this landscape of death that envelopes all of us now as we witness the excavations of plague-pits and as everyone experiences the lurking fear of sheltering in place, with its dark dreams, its derangements of isolation and virtual meeting places, and its absurd and vile discourses upon toilet paper shortages and germ-plumes. Just to breathe or (apparently) to talk too close to the wrong person is to risk death or involuntary manslaughter. This is our current “structure of feeling” and it is unbearable.

In a passage apropos of your remarks and von Trier’s film title, Kristeva writes, “Abjection accompanies all religious structurings.” Her mini-chapters on “Perverse or Artistic” and “As Abjection — So the Sacred” seem apt to our discussion:

The various means of purifying the abject — the various catharses — make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and the near side of religion. Seen from that standpoint, the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential element of religiosity.

Kristeva also notes (in “Catharsis and Analysis”) that modernity tends to “repress, dodge, or fake” abjection. She offers psychoanalysis and contemporary literature as a manner of sublimating

abjection, making the latter “a substitute for the role formerly played by the sacred, at the limits of social and subjective identity.” I think we can avoid a scrap over the primacy of religion, art, or analysis by simply noting the alliance of these three distinctive modes against the smug certainties of consumerism, with its empty promises of life-extension in a world devoid of meaning.

This unstable but important alliance forms a good lens for bringing von Trier’s film back into focus. In Willem Dafoe and Charlotte Gainsbourg, he has found two actors whose commitment to abjection appears to be total. They want to be here in this terrible place together, it would seem, but why? Present my leg as attached to a millstone? Ha, sure, why not? Mime me cutting off my own clitoris? Okay, I’m game, it didn’t really happen, after all. My best guess is that for all of these artists there’s some background belief in role-played abjection as a form of therapy. Their issues have issues, and some viewers who feel “the blackness of darkness forever” (as described in that Biblical Letter of Jude) may take a strange comfort in these projections of horror. They might feel less alone in their paralyzing depression. Certainly this is true of *Melancholia* and you’ve said the same applies to *Antichrist*’s rendition of a panic attack, for example. The mini-tradition of “abyss-gazing” applies here, I think, for those who wish to “go there.”

Yet I maintain that without a clear understanding of the fictive nature of a film like *Antichrist*, its potentially cathartic powers of horror are easily misunderstood. It makes better sense for von Trier to highlight the confected nature of his films — and of cinema in general — than to adhere to the DOGME 95 theses, which mistake style for truth. The artist, writer, singer, critic, analyst, authentically religious person, or filmmaker who opens their wounds forms a node of resistance that is all the more valuable for being fictive, since facts alone cannot save us from this situation. Real wounds, but, importantly, filtered through the fashioning of fiction, even if it’s autofiction on some level.



Kristeva aligns her analysis with her reading of Aristotle's concepts of catharsis and performance in the *Poetics*, as opposed to the standard view of Plato's denigration of art as a second-order copy or shadow of reality. So:

To Platonic *death*, which owned, so to speak, the state of purity, Aristotle opposed the act of *poetic purification* — in itself an impure process that protects from the abject only by dint of being immersed in it. The abject, mimed through sound and meaning, is *repeated*. Getting rid of it is out of the question....

Indeed. One might be reminded once again of the ancient homeopathic practice of burying oneself in dung to escape from ill vapors, which is not a bad analogy for von Trier's films. This mimicry cannot exorcise the abject but brings the audience and perhaps the actors and the filmmaker into a closer habitation with its rhythms. The fictionality of fiction, then, is not only fitting but also necessary for distinguishing the operational function of this kind of art from the merely exploitative or sensation-alistic torture-porn, which tends toward reactionary affect when it is more realistic.

The punk or goth or genuinely religious alternative of *letting everything in* is not easy or necessarily wise — it leaves us open to the abject because the damage of personal and collective history runs deep and everyone is implicated. It's not anybody's place to force this stuff on anyone else in some sort of sadistic tripping through some catalogue of trigger warnings or taboos — which is how I felt about the depravity of *The House That Jack Built*. But disavowal of the abject also stifles us inwardly because it cuts off our ability to speak or even admit that we feel truthful things out of a repressive terror of appearing unclean.

Ultimately, I wonder if *Antichrist* will be viewed, in secret or in very small groups, for hundreds of years, as a Grünewald-level curio and toxic counter-exhibition from an utterly demented era

in which countless hours were spent on Facebook and billions of pounds of carbon released into the atmosphere in a fruitless collective project to convince everyone (including ourselves) that we were normal, healthy, upbeat, productive contributors to a smiley-faced society (like Dafoe's "Man" at the start of the film). The whole artistic landscape of the New Extremity is, perhaps, at its best, a characteristically "European" reaction to and rejection of an Americanized globe that refuses to recognize the validity and calling of the abject as the actual structure of birth and death, and as something fundamental to the deep storytelling of art, myth, and religion. If we think we can do without abjection we'll end up as cloned colonists on Mars farming space cabbages for Elon Musk and call it "progress."

I've been trying to think of a good way to describe what I feel are the limitations of von Trier's aesthetic. The filmmakers he wishes to emulate — Dreyer, Bergman, and Tarkovsky — make comparisons somewhat absurd. But, to return to a point I made earlier, I see von Trier as more akin to Hitchcock in that they're both very much "on brand" most of the time. This isn't really true of his trinity of conscious influences, especially not Dreyer and Bergman. Bergman makes films that deliberately contradict one another, like *The Hour of the Wolf* and *The Magic Flute*. Both pictures feature scenes of audiences watching Mozart's opera, but one is nightmarishly surreal and the other cuts away to kids laughing at the antics onstage. This goes beyond the conventional limits of the auteurist or Old Masters conception of cinema as a pantheon of (invariably white and male) figures with signature styles and recognizable worldviews, which was never a very good fit for this art form in any event.

Bergman is more Shakespearean, for lack of a better word, in this insistence on multiplicity rather than duality. He considers many of the same or similar problems and poses some of the same questions we've been considering, in various guises, but with a staggering range that feels incompatible with the contemporary approach to registering a kind of stylistic trademark

and branding oneself as the purveyor of this or that type of stuff. It's silly to say that von Trier is not Bergman, as if that's some insight. But this line of thought inevitably leads me to wonder if there was a contemporary filmmaker who overlapped with our own lives as moviegoers and who reached further into these depths. Whose work is never just one or two things, but contains its own contradictions and yet somehow expands beyond them into deeper mysteries... Kieślowski?

Good cheer, if such be possible, from your friend JMT

May 18, 2020, 12:02 PM

Dear Josh,

Ha! Definitely not interested in “laying down the law.” So, my apologies if the last letter was pushing a bit too hard for you. It is a fine line sometimes between trying to express my own thoughts and experiences in a satisfying way on the one hand and trying to convince you of something on the other. I am interested in the former. I’m not at all interested in the latter. As an argument, my points about death and elegy are, I know, completely unconvincing and verging on the unhinged. But for me, the actual sense of it is obvious and clear as day. The gap between those two things is probably infinite. But I do think that there is a reason that so many people who have had religious experiences or spiritual awakenings or whatever you want to call it, talk, in some sort of insufficient language, about dying to the world and then being reborn to it out of that dying. This experience is completely reorienting. It happened to me, as you more or less know, in my alcoholic collapse that brought me down into a place darker and more abysmal than I had ever imagined possible. Down in that place, the self I thought I knew was essentially obliterated. Funnily enough, that turned out to be a good thing, though it took me many years to fully realize this. One thing that has stayed with me is the very deeply felt sense that, as Ecclesiastes puts it, all is vanity. Really and truly. Not a cliché. But really and truly all is vanity. This does not prevent me from participating in the vanity with all my heart and soul. In a sense, vanity is all there is, so we may as well dive in. But everything shifted, for me, out of the experience of having already died once, sort of. I can’t quite believe in the world in the way I see others believing in it. I believe in something else, though belief isn’t really quite the right word for it either. Alas, that’s about the best I can do right now putting words to it. I know it fails.

It is interesting to me that you keep bringing up Kristeva. That *Powers of Horror* book fascinates and frustrates me by turns.

One thing you haven't mentioned is that the literary hero of the book is Céline. I don't know, but if I had to think of someone who is to film as Céline is to literature it might very well be Lars von Trier. I think this only strengthens the point you are making.

Yes, you could say that von Trier and Céline are both artists of the abject. But then there is a question of what the artist of the abject is trying to do. Your point is that the abject is a useful tool for pruning. It helps us get rid of that which is empty and hypocritical and false. But we don't want to fall into the abject as abject. We don't want to get pulled into the whirlpool of the abject for its own sake, because there is only death and destruction and horror down there. The abject has to do something for us or else it becomes the cure that is worse than the disease, the disease being, in your example, the shallow consumerism, literal and aesthetic, of modern life. I think what you are saying is absolutely true. Von Trier, as we've talked about, is deeply interested in the therapeutic and Kristeva is, of course, also thinking about all of this from the standpoint of the analyst and the psychological. But for me, the abject isn't so easily controlled.

In the pretty damn amazing last chapter of *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva wonders aloud to herself what the point is of emphasizing the "horrors of being." Her answer is that there are those people, through the circumstances of history, or through their own personalities, who have had the normal fabric of their subjectivity ripped wide open. They've seen and felt that the thing that is supposed to be real and self-contained, the "I," is in fact a kind of madness riding on the id-wracked seas of the abject with all its inchoate indeterminacy, everything that revolts and disgusts precisely in the subject's need to substantiate itself as over and against all that cannot be substantiated. The person, the artist, who allows herself to be taken into the realm of the abject learns that the abject is not something outside of the subject by which the subject can test itself, but is, more scarily (more sacredly?), the very source and origin of that very subjectivity. It

is what's down there. We are all nothing but the abyss. To go down in there is to risk seeing that. And to risk never coming out again.

This, I think, is what von Trier has been trying to risk in all his movies. It is his own semi-secular version of the dark night of the soul. He has access to what Kristeva is talking about, to the powers of horror. And I don't think he has a choice. Maybe he sometimes plays it as if it's all just a joke in the end. It is all just a movie, all fiction. But once again I must say I disagree with you that this is any key to what von Trier is doing. I think, quite to the contrary, that von Trier always brings up the artifice of the filmmaking process to give you a false sense of relief and then to destroy even that relief, to show that there is no refuge from the abject, that there is no comfort in the false distinction between fiction and reality. It takes fiction, in this case, to show us the real truth of what we've known all along. That is also what Kristeva says Céline does with literature. To create a form of writing that makes the abject into an unbearable reality that should completely and utterly destroy our ability to hold our world together, hold ourselves together, that throws us into the abyss without any tether whatsoever.

Why do this? There is no why here. There is no assurance that can be given. That's why the abject is pure horror. You are not in control anymore. This kind of art is about relinquishing control. This kind of art is about throwing oneself completely onto the mercy of the infinite, which has no mercy in the traditional sense. What happens in this process is that all bets are off. One is transformed. The outcome is for the gods to decide, which they always do anyway.

Well, for what it's worth, that is my best shot and drawing all these threads of the last few letters together into one crazy and probably incoherent set of thoughts. I recognize that this is not your experience, either of the world or of yourself or of the films of Lars von Trier. My hope is not that you see it my way. I don't

want Josh to be anyone but Josh, just as I can be none other than Morgan. My hope is only, I suppose, to be heard a little bit just as I am trying to hear you. I think you are right, anyway, that it would be interesting to redirect our attention to another kind of artist, a less demonic artist, an artist who has a different relationship with the medium altogether. It was Kieslowski, after all, who tried to make the holiest movie of them all. He actually tried to film the Ten Commandments! That thought, I must say, never fails to astound me. I am quite curious as to how you view the project.

warmly,

morgan

# Mystery

On Krzysztof Kieślowski





May 21, 2020, 12:37 PM

Dear Morgan,

These letters are a balm in the midst of all this — whatever *this* is or will be called. Late Spring in a poisoned garden of earthly delights where the whiff of magnolia and dogwood blossoms and an invisible cloud of death hangs in the air above the masked walkers in our nation's capital. 100,000 already dead from COVID-19 in America, with the likely toll much higher than the official figure. We are learning to live under a scythe, somewhat like the dreaming figure depicted in the mysterious publicity still from Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1931) of the young woman sleeping beneath the shadow of death.

I think we have marked out a good, flexible boundary for our exchanges here with our shared interest in Kristeva's view of catharsis. I agree with you that catharsis has to be real — we have to “go there” and experience the abject. (Well, we have no choice, really, in the end, it's only a question of our level of honesty about it, as you suggest. As the gospel song has it, we all go to the lonesome valley, and nobody else can go there for us.) But I cling to the fundamentally fictional aspects of these works we're discussing, like Jimmy Stewart hanging on to the gutter above the street many stories down, in the opening scene of *Vertigo* (1958). We never see anybody save him and in fact he's in a position from which it seems impossible to survive or escape. Hang in there, kitten!

I think some sense of distance is necessary to the catharsis offered by fiction. I don't think that's true, or as true, for analysis or ritual. And this basic necessity for distance, in the safer space of the theater or the cinema, especially, marks a difference from either the analyst's room or the confessional, where the distance shrinks. Each mode contains its own reality but they operate differently. It's not that art isn't real but that it has its own function, purpose, flavor, or what have you. We're lucky and glad *not*

to be experiencing the things depicted onscreen, on stage, or in a book.

I'm also saying that the cinema is not a chapel and should not pretend to host a "congregation," etc. Otherwise we land in the soft zone of "the Bible as Literature" and all that New Age muck. And I'm not talking here about contemporary secular ideas about fiction and positivist truth-claims or box-ticking assent to a series of relative absurdities as the basis on which the value of religion should be assessed. That's garbage talk from the Dawkins/Hitchens crowd.

This difference means everything. Saint Paul experienced something extremely important to him on the road to Damascus. A hell of a lot of human history depends on what he experienced and what it all meant to him. It's no good saying "I believe that you believe it, Paul," like the parents in that proverbial horror movie, although that was basically James's unimpressed reaction, we're told.

There's hardcore Jewish theology involved in Paul's claims, not just some nice ideas about equality in the face of the divine, or ladies wearing hats while preaching, or even the overwhelming Pauline sentiment that basically boils down to "please stop jerking around." His claims regarding Jewish prophecies are fascinating. Paul was probably wrong in his historical claims about those prophecies, or at least he had his timing off by thousands of years, and this matters, too. James was probably correct on a technical level that his brother Jesus was someone to be followed and emulated, not worshipped. Both would have found the concept of the Trinity bizarre if not blasphemous from a Jewish theological perspective. So what?

The whole thing is painful, awkward, and scandalous, as the theologians like to say, but there's no use crying over spilt milk, and, besides, I'll take Mont-Saint-Michel over Starbucks

any day of the week. At Chartres, as I think I mentioned before, the congregants seemed to hold a service underground to avoid the tourists snapping disgraceful and meaningless photos of bowed figures praying before the Virgin's Veil. The meaning of the prayer isn't invalidated if someone gets the idea of performing chemical tests on the Veil, and divinity, if present, does not evaporate the moment the tourist posts their photo to Instagram to document that they've "done" Chartres. No, they haven't. They were never really there at all, in one sense. But you can be sure that they themselves have suffered in another, hidden place. Or that they will suffer.

\* \* \*

More and more I try to adhere to the Chekhovian view that fiction attempts to pose certain questions rather than to provide answers to life's problems. For me, Kieślowski is the Chekhov of the cinema. *Dekalog* is like a book of Chekhov stories that have been linked together into something approaching perfection. Even its imperfections are part of its perfection, in that way that certain masterpieces have of gathering new meanings over time. It's an Everest or a K2 of cinema and yet it was made for broadcast television, far away from the studios of Hollywood. Kieślowski did not invent quality television, of course. Bergman and Fassbinder had done remarkable things with the medium in the 1970s, for starters. But *Dekalog* helped to presage our era of hour-long serial entertainment as a node of serious art.

Nothing about this production should have been possible and yet the series seems to contain the universe inside it. *Dekalog* was created by Kieślowski and many of the key players in his "stock company" at a shocking pace in 1988, during the final years of the communist regime in Poland. You can find the whole world within his tower block of flats. Everyone and everything seems to be in here, all of postwar 20th-century history, America, Europe, and the Eastern Bloc, the Holocaust, communism, and Christ. Murder and love, betrayal and loyalty, com-

edy and tragedy, suicide and redemption, philosophy and milk delivery. You can lose yourself and find yourself in this series of short films. Watch them again and they rearrange themselves into a new configuration with novel surprises. Look into any window and you'll find your neighbors and family members living there, no matter who you are or where you are — or when.

That effect is little short of miraculous, but we'll likely disagree about whether the movies themselves are all so holy. I doubt Kieślowski viewed it that way. In fact, he abandoned filmmaking. He refused to call himself an artist. Think of that. This might make him appear saintly in our eyes, in the way that a saint never thinks of themselves as a saint. And, sure, Kieślowski's films are shot through with... something.

His most important collaborator on *Dekalog*, Krzysztof Piesiewicz, also his co-writer on *No End* (1985), *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), and the *Three Colors* trilogy (1993–94), was a serious man of faith (and later, a prominent politician — O Europe!) who injected a second layer of reflection on Catholicism into what we might try to discern as “Kieślowski's worldview.”

Kieślowski's own remarks about Piesiewicz are more complicated and torn. So are his own remarks about religion, as you know. Kieślowski was deeply interested and personally involved in — as well as intellectually intrigued by — religious thinking, religious skepticism, the paranormal, supernaturalism, and the durable value of Biblical texts for attempting to think through the complexity of contemporary life.

“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy” — this is the statement of a character in a play who's seen a person after their death, whose visitation seems to compel specific conclusions and actions. Yet Hamlet's certainty about what he thinks he knows of the otherworldly is fatal to him and many others. That's interesting to con-

template for a minute — or a lifetime. I take it that Kieślowski's viewpoint is not Hamlet's but Shakespeare's. It accepts the idea of "more things," even if it doesn't pretend to know what they are, what they mean, how they operate, exactly, what they require of us, or whether they are even certain to be salutary. Interestingly, Shakespeare's phrasing here is *not* "in heaven and on earth," it is "in heaven and earth," implying that there are more things *in earth* and that heaven and earth — whatever might be meant by those terms — may not be disconnected realms. Which, in turn, suggests that we might not really know what we mean by those terms after all. And then there is the matter of hell and earth, a matter that is implied but censored in Shakespeare.

This gesture towards "more things" is also the basic position that scholarship on Kieślowski tends to take up. Annette Insdorf, whose work in her book *Double Lives, Second Chances* is recapitulated and expanded in her interview with the Criterion Collection for the DVD release of the restored *Dekalog*, argues her case like this:

Kieślowski is one of the great filmmakers who used the physical to express the metaphysical. There is the suggestion so often in Kieślowski's *Dekalog* of something beyond the practical, the quotidian, the perceivable. If we look closely at the cinematic storytelling of the *Dekalog*, we'll be able to see this masterful use of imagery, of music, of structure, even, but not just for its own sake. For me it's a literal "going beyond." In other words, going beyond what the camera can frame, going beyond what the eye can see. And Kieślowski, who himself was not comfortable with the adjective "religious," preferring "spiritual" — I think he would have acknowledged that he believed that there was transcendence in our daily lives. That at moments, for example, when we feel and express love we are transcending the ordinary.

Geoff Andrew, in his book on *Three Colors*, comes to a similar conclusion about *The Double Life of Veronique*:

Critical reaction to the film was largely enthusiastic, but the critics were a little mystified as to what, precisely, Kieślowski was trying to say: this emphatically, was his most “meta-physical” work to date, predicated on a mysterious, almost supernatural connection between its two protagonists. At the same time, however, notwithstanding a visual style described by critic Jonathan Romney, in a review for *Sight & Sound*, as “luminous, numinous, and ominous,” Kieślowski firmly grounded his story of “irrational” presentiments and inexplicable emotions in a recognisable material universe. Quite simply, the film was a brave, unusually successful attempt to evoke and explore the unseen, unfathomable forces — fate and chance — that shape our lives as we go about our banal business in a tangibly corporeal world.

The overlap in the critical consensus on this issue is clear, according to these two books published within a year of one another, during 1998–99, the peak of the Kieślowski Boom, one might say, a few years after the filmmaker’s untimely death in 1996, when critics had time to collect themselves from the shock and compose their considered tributes. (I was just out of college then, so, for me, the *Dekalog* did not hit home until the 2016 restoration from the Criterion Collection, which you and I screened in full for my students when you visited my class in Richmond in 2017. We saw it projected in its full nine-and-a-half-hour glory, on a single day, an unforgettable cinematic peak experience on the big screen at the Grace Street Theater. Very different, however, from the original viewer’s experience of the broadcasts!)

I think the Kieślowski Boom, in its turn, contained some sort of nascent recognition that materialism wasn’t going to cut the mustard anymore as the century and the millennium drew to a close. Kieślowski weights the dice in favor of religious thinking’s ability to cut through the warped and damaged self-conceptions we’re conditioned to accept by the structures of modern rationality and secular instrumental industrial belief-systems that ac-

company them. So Kieślowski, in retrospect, becomes another artist that presages our postsecular era and forms a generational bridge to the 21st century. One thing that is so fascinating about his work is the fundamental skepticism about both capitalism and communism that underlies his filmmaking methods. The real battles and the real stakes are elsewhere, he seems to suggest. Religious thinking and art offer a rich set of alternatives with which to fight back against liberal market supremacy and evangelical reactionary traditionalism. In this specific sense, his films offer many potential futures in which alternatives might be contemplated vis-à-vis certain modern confusions over the meaning of love and sex, morality and law, equality and power, freedom and solidarity, and so on. Something like this — Christian humanism — lies at the heart of the *Dekalog*.

I'm confident that Kieślowski can be quoted as having said that there must be a deity of some kind. But I think this makes him feel humbled rather than exalted about the status of his art, and causes him to downgrade rather than praise his own work. For you these films feel holy. For him this might sound like idolatry. Art — or at least film — didn't have that status for him. Of course, he might have been wrong. And maybe this attitude marks his work as *all the more holy* for you. That seems like a thoughtful reading to me, I don't wish to deny it, at all. All I'm saying is that this is an artist whose appeal is not primarily devotional but rather questioning and troubled. And *Dekalog* is a production that resonates deeply with believers and nonbelievers alike.

The published screenplay of *Dekalog* compelled the unheard-of compliment of a Foreword by Stanley Kubrick, after all. Kubrick used to call up Stephen King when he was filming *The Shining* (1980) and ask King if he believed in God. Apparently Kubrick liked to hang up on King. Kubrick toyed with notions of things beyond our ken and deeply vibed with the irrational elements of humanity but he had little patience for conventional religion, to put it mildly. Yet here he is penning a paragraph about how Kieślowski and Piesiewicz pierced his heart because of the writ-



ers' "very rare ability to *dramatize* their ideas rather than just talking about them." But you might turn and say that's precisely what you mean by a holy film — one that can reach the zero Kelvin depths of the coolest of cool hearts. Fair play.

It's almost as if Kieślowski's films act as a kind of Rorschach Test for one's one beliefs. Or that they cause us to investigate what it is that we really truly believe. This remains true, I think, even if the pictures never seem to clarify anything precisely in any way that distinguishes between the human experiences of the divine, the otherworldly, the supernatural, the spiritual, or the spiritualist. In fact, the more I think about it, the more spiritualist Kieślowski seems, in a way that's problematic for any orthodox religious reading of his films, since spiritualism raises so many difficult theological questions about the nature of a deity who would indulge themselves in such things. Religious viewers who already share certain beliefs might experience Kieślowski's cinema in ways that challenge those beliefs in some ways and reinforce them in other ways, if I can use such blunt and clumsy language. Put another way, this stuff is there in the films for those who have ears to hear. But I think Kieślowski's real target is *certainty* about these things — the "more things" described by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*. As I see it, his is a continuation of the struggles in Bergman, especially in *Fanny & Alexander* (1983, another movie designed for television!).

Don't you think Kieślowski would have delighted in this ability of his work to keep alternative readings in such delicate balance? This goes to the heart of what I value most about his films, personally, their expressions of such strong ambiguity or negative capability, holding, again, like the films of Bergman, both sides of seemingly irreconcilable polarities. Kieślowski reminds me how little I know, how much of what I think I know requires unknowing, and how there might be more things that I do not yet know and probably will never understand. This brings me back to Kieślowski's most fundamental self-definition of himself

as an artist as “somebody who doesn’t know, somebody who’s searching.”

I’ll be glad to hear you reframe all this very differently. What you mean by a “holy movie” is simply going to be much more interesting since you are living it and following the gospel. And that stunning first episode of *Dekalog* seems to provide plenty of threads for you to gather up here into your own pattern. How do you see all this?

Notes from Your Friend JMT

May 23, 2020, 11:23 AM

Lovely thoughts, Josh,

My one objection is the following. Whoever said that devotional was the opposite of questioning and troubled? Devotion *is* questioning and troubled, or it is not devotion.

Which brings us to your question of whether *Dekalog* is a holy film, at least for me, and what I might mean by that. I like to think of *Dekalog* in contrast to Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, with Charlton Heston and all that. I don't actually want to run down DeMille's film, which, for all its unintended campiness, contains tons of delightful scenes and manages to distill enough of that DeMille exuberance to, I don't know, be something in its own right. There is one huge problem with *The Ten Commandments*, though. Its attempt to depict the biblical era is a complete failure if the intention was to draw us closer to the actual meaning and purpose of the biblical stories. I mean, it's a wonderful disaster as an attempt to make art of holy scripture.

So, I think of *Dekalog* as an attempt to answer the question of what's actually holy about holy scripture. Or, to put it another way, what if anything actually matters about something as supposedly important as the ten commandments? Is there a way that those commandments still have relevance in the late-20th-century world? Do they make a claim on us? And what would it look like if they did? What kinds of stories of day-to-day Polish life in the 1980s would you tell if you wanted to show the root issues of human life and its limits? Because that's what the commandments are about, right? The commandments frame human behavior with a set of limits. And they suggest that the breaking of those limits will always constitute crisis. Coming up against the set of parameters that are the ten commandments means coming up against the very boundaries of human behavior. It is not, by the way, that those boundaries cannot be crossed. Even

in the Hebrew Bible they are crossed all the time. All the frickin' time. By the very people otherwise also described as the holiest and most favored by God. In fact, the holiest people seem more often than not to be the ones who live life closest to those boundaries and who often overstep them. King David, for instance, is a murderer and adulterer, just to name a couple of his transgressions. He is also, as you would put it, questioning and troubled. He does wrong knowing that it is wrong and is then torn apart by the dilemmas he has thrown himself into. Maybe that's why God loves him so much. David seems to understand deep in his bones that being human is a problem. It is something to be struggled with. The commandments simply name the outer limits of that struggle, the place where the tensions of the struggle condense into diamond-like intensity.

The commandments are holy because they establish the contours of human life as something generally meaningful, where something is actually at stake, and within which we wrangle the specific meaning that is an individual life. God the Father, the author of the commandments, is simply a name to give the cosmic reality of this truth, a truth we don't choose willy nilly, but one that is real, given to us, lived within, and met with obedience, not obedience in the stupid sense of being a robotic rule follower, but obedience in the sense of getting it, getting that being a human being means being in a constant tumult, a constant crisis of action and deliberation whereby we sort of know what we're supposed to do but we have no idea how to do it and we are a mystery to ourselves most of the time even as we try to be what we think we're supposed to be.

And then sometimes, despite ourselves, it all snaps into place. And when it does, there is a kind of luminous rightness about the world, or other people, or our own souls, if just for a moment. We see that love is real. We know that we are cared for, somehow, by someone or something. And then the feeling fades and we are back out in the cold again. All of this is possible because there is a "not us." Even if we don't know exactly what

that is or how to define it. But one way, at least, to gesture at this looming and intractable “not us” is to refer to the pillar of the commandments as that pole around which it is possible to strive to be as much the human being as one can strive to be. You brought up Kubrick. I don’t think the monolith of *2001: A Space Odyssey* needs to be thought of as any kind of extraterrestrial presence in the typical sense of space aliens or whatever. In fact, the monolith is just the sort of looming stone upon which ancient cultures liked to write their laws. It looms, it hovers, it dominates. We ignore it much of the time. But we cannot get away from it. There is something real, something internal and external at the same time, by which we are constantly orienting ourselves in our struggle just to be.

That whole set of tensions and realities and possibilities and real, true human struggles in the face of trying to get it right, that’s the material that Kieślowski is working with in *Dekalog*, in my opinion. What kinds of human stories do the “reality” of the ten commandments actually generate? What sorts of tragedies? What sorts of comedies? The movies that Kieślowski created are holy, to me, because of how seriously they take this proposition. The fact that he frames it all under the umbrella of the Decalogue means that he is fundamentally a religious artist, like it or not. The point of being a religious artist is simply the acknowledgment, in this case, that the religious is unavoidable. Being a being of any sort, a creature, and especially being the sort of creature that is the human creature, is to be in the throes of a dilemma. It is to be pulled apart and to seek, foolishly and seemingly without hope, to pull it all together. Or, to put a word to this struggle, to re-bind: *re-ligio*.

Kieślowski’s *Dekalog*, I’d propose, is about that.

much love,

morgan

May 25, 2020, 11:28 AM

Dear Morgan,

What you say about DeMille is interesting. I'm reminded of the flabbergasting opening of *King of Kings* (1927). After enlisting the clergy in the marketing campaign for the film, and larding the credits with various pieties about spreading the Gospel and playing a "reverent" part in the unfolding story of Christ, Demille opens his picture in... a brothel. The devastating Jacqueline Logan, playing Mary Magdalene with intelligent inner sadness, is on display in front of an array of feasting men who wish to purchase her services, while she cuddles a leopard and a scantily-clad troupe of musicians serenades the scene. And it's all in glorious color, unlike most of the scenes of the Carpenter that follow. The scene is outrageous and splendid. It's structured like this: "Jesus Christ blah, blah, blah... BOOM, BANG, BOMB — LOOK, HERE'S A SEX LEOPARD!"

Kieślowski's not having any of that approach to his material, you're right. Your perspective makes sense to me because the *Dekalog*'s claim on the viewer is of the "you must change your life" variety. And I agree with you that devotion is not separate from troubled questioning. I was looking back to see how I wound up saying something so silly. I think I wasn't intending to limn the nature of devotion itself (if so, I was plain wrong) but rather to attempt to draw a distinction between works of art that demand to be read as devotional in a celebratory sense and Kieślowski *Dekalog*, which contains more free-play and ambiguity. Kieślowski isn't entirely convinced one way or the other. I think his attack is on certainty and smugness itself, both secular and religious. That's why I would place him, as I mentioned previously, somewhere between Bergman, who was haunted by his rejection of faith, and Tarkovsky, who was attempting to create parables of faith whenever he made a film. If I imagine Kieślowski's heart of hearts, I see the word "hmm" imprinted there, without irony. I don't think he's a religious skeptic in any

pure sense but I do see him as a (post)modern follower of Montaigne's maxim, "What do I know?"

For me it's difficult if not impossible to reconcile the various modes of supernaturalism in *No End*, *Dekalog*, *Double Life*, and *Blue*. It's all a little bit messy, but, like, in a profound, searching way. To ask which of these films "gets it right" would be the wrong question in my view. The right questions for these films, I think, are "Is there something more?" and "What do we really know about it all?" and "How must we try to live here and now?" (Or how to die, as you have made a strong case in your previous letters.) I sense that Kieślowski is relentlessly exploring a subject (it goes much deeper than this intellectual-sounding description, of course, but perhaps you get my drift?) rather than finding a resting point in any single devotional attitude towards a deity to whom he feels bound, in the specific sense that you describe as the etymological core of the word "religion."

Not to take away from your points, especially regarding the possibility of what you call the "not-us" and your beautiful remark that "being a human being means being in a constant tumult, a constant crisis of action and deliberation whereby we sort of know what we're supposed to do but we have no idea how to do it and we are a mystery to ourselves most of the time even as we try to be what we think we're supposed to be." That's a sentence to savor and let simmer for a long while. And not to deny your insight about the boundary-crossing aspects of the human experience of the Commandments, in the Bible and in the series.

I'm reminded of Kieślowski's strong emphasis on Jewish identity in the *Dekalog*, especially in the all-important Episode 8, about the Polish experience of resistance and collaboration during the Holocaust. One of the most basic and long-standing Christian misunderstandings of Jewish religious thinking involves the false idea that the "Old Testament" in general and the Commandments in particular are to be viewed as "legalistic." (Misreadings of St. Paul are involved, which I won't get into here.) In

fact, as you point out, the Jewish tradition often involves us in the dramas of those who have broken the Commandments. The role of the faith community was always more about the tension and struggle to keep oneself within bounds. Simply put, they would not be needed if they were kept, and faith brings us back into alignment with God when we've gone astray.

In fact, it is *Christian* ethics that has always faced theological difficulties with confused believers thinking that they can do what they like to others because they are born again, up to the present day. Paul tried his damndest to develop answers to these problems and was frustrated by those who did not view ethical conduct as common sense. And it took the subtlest minds in the galaxy centuries of wrangling to figure out a way to describe the Christian faith and the worship of Jesus as somehow itself *not* a violation of the Commandment to have "no other gods before me." Not to preempt our discussion of *Dekalog* 8, which we should put on the back burner for now, but that's the episode where one of the most noble characters in the series wears necklace ornaments featuring both Jewish and Christian symbols. And this is not presented in the spirit of New Age syncretism.

Part of me would like to go out on a limb and attempt a "Jewish" reading of Kieślowski, if I can put it that way, and to inch out even further on that limb by suggesting that this reading positions the filmmaker as responding to Poland's deepest historical trauma.

In any event, his challenges to ideas like Providence in parts of the *Dekalog*, especially in that opening episode, are extreme. David Hume would have appreciated it just as much as anyone, since the meaningless death of a child conveys better than anything Hume's highly annoying, brutally precise questions about a God who, in his view, cannot be all-powerful and all-good simultaneously, especially not if that God is all-knowing. Or that such a God as has been said to watch over this world is not



worth the paper He's printed on, for Hume, given how things have turned out.

I'm not saying that Kieślowski shares Hume's view, only that he encompasses something like Hume's considerations in his drama, as well as many more perspectives besides. In *Dekalog* 1, he gives his protagonist — the one who ultimately rejects God and topples the altar in his church — his own first name, Krzysztof (played by Henryk Baranowski). But, again, with this filmmaker, that "move" does not mean that Krzysztof is Krzysztof's mouthpiece. Far from it.

The character puts his faith in a computer which calculates the depth of ice in the pond near their home based on current weather conditions. As a result, he tells his boy, Paweł (Wojciech Klata), that it is safe to skate on the ice when it's not, and Paweł drowns. I've read that in the draft screenplay, an explanation was offered for this fatal error of calculation. An adjacent factory was pumping warmer water or waste of some kind into the pond, a factor not taken into the machine's accounting. This emphasis on a local social problem is replaced in the finished film with a far more cosmic mystery, since the cause of the thin ice remains unknown.

The narrative becomes elliptical when this information is removed, expanding the film's reach in a more philosophical direction. All we know is that modern instrumental rationality has failed, spectacularly, in its supposedly utilitarian mission. The machine has not been of use — it has proved fatal. One must admit that without the computer it's just as easy to fall through ice, but maybe the machine makes us arrogant in some specific way that leads to our destruction. Maybe we would not venture out, maybe we would act more humbly? Actually, I doubt it! There's a spongy spot in the narrative here.

Of course there is an equally important character in *Dekalog 1*, Paweł's aunt, Irena (Maja Komorowska), a person of faith who wishes to instruct the boy in religious mystery. After Paweł's death, Irena's faith remains strongly intact while Krzysztof's angry atheism is also reinforced. Faith is a light in the darkness and a solace in the storm of grief. Faith is an illusion covering up the abyss where grief indicates that everything is meaningless suffering. We're presented with two things that are both true and yet cannot both be true. We must choose and yet we cannot choose. For me, this is Kieślowski.

When Krzysztof attacks the altar in his rage and despair near the end of the episode, something occurs that is either a coincidence or a tiny miracle. The wax drips on an icon from a candle that has been knocked down. The wax hits the face of the icon just right so that it seems to be crying. God cries even for (or especially for?) those who lose their way or even lose their faith. Another miracle happens here — somehow, Kieślowski's handling of this moment, tonally, is beyond irony and yet not intended as any definitive proof of anything. I think that is why it does not strike most viewers as cheesy when it really should do so. Yet another example in his films of something that shouldn't work but does, somehow.

Actually the episode leaves a more careful theodicy intact. It's not God's job to intervene in human free will — it was Paweł's own decision to go out on the ice and Krzysztof's choice to tell him it was safe. Without free will, including the most destructive choices or tragic accidental blunders, humanity is not worth anything. And yet it's not God's business to alter the laws of physics in order to prevent Paweł's drowning, any more than it is to prevent volcanoes from erupting and burying cities and towns from time to time. Without a universe that operates on regular rules, everything would be so bizarre and chaotic that it would make things worse, not better. This comfort is cold. It's theologically sound, but at a cost.

I don't really think that it's *Kieślowski's* intention to present this theodicy. I think he wants to show us the human experiences of *Krzysztof* and *Irena*. *Krzysztof* responds to the tragedy with anger. One could say that his atheism is escalated by his son's death, but I'm not so sure. He wrecks the altar rather than walking away from it. That rage suggests he's still in conversation with God, on some level, since you cannot blame someone who does not exist for something they did not do. God feels distant and uncaring in this light. This is Hume's God, who, if He exists, is not worthy of our worship. We reread the Bible — or the historical record — looking for clues about why God intervenes in one place and time but not another. He sacrifices a child — along with the Jews of Europe — to keep his divine attributes intact, but then pops up to make a bit of wax fall in a certain way on a painting that one time? *Krzysztof's* reaction suggests that he thinks God is punishing him for his atheism — for breaking the First Commandment, taking a computer as an idol, and ascribing omniscience to a human-made hunk of plastic and wires. But God cannot punish unless God exists, and this seems to me to be a very clunky reading of the episode. What's horrific and rigorously exacting about the Calvinist insight into monotheism comes to the fore here. God knew that *Paweł* would die and sat on His hands.

*Irena* sees the same events from an entirely different perspective, of course. Taking up *Irena's* view of things and extrapolating from it, we begin to see that dripping wax as being suspended between chance and something larger. Through *Irena's* eyes, we begin to see *Krzysztof's* anger and even his atheism — even the disarray of the altar after his outburst — are not something separate from the divine. This requires the nonbelievers watching the episode to jolt themselves into uncomfortable territory. God takes in all this misery and much more besides. God isn't punishing *Krzysztof*, but in this case divinity cannot intervene. Why should people expect this to happen for them when no intervention took place on the Cross — or in Auschwitz?

Irena's faith exists at a more profound level, we sense. She accepts God's lack of intervention in the world, refuses to assign blame, and finds comfort in worship for what is unbearable. To say that something good will come out of Paweł's death sounds like idiocy, and yet that idiocy is the most basic belief of the Cross. A deeper pattern must exist, Irena believes, even though she cannot imagine what form that might take. Do we see that dripping wax through her eyes or through his?

In this image of the face of an icon, God has accepted and embraced Krzysztof's anger and rejection. Startling thought — God feels that on some level Krzysztof is right, or at least loves him in his very human grief and his understandable inability to move beyond a limited understanding of the universe. Atheism and even the hatred of God is encompassed by the divine. Yes, atheism is divine — we know this because so many ardent atheists are such lovable, ethical people. They care too much to worship, although we don't know what they really believe in their heart of hearts on any given night, sleepless, alert, worrying about those they love, at 2am.

The ultimate thought, often ascribed to the early Christian theologian Origen, is that, given a long enough timeline, all will be saved, eventually, even the Devil. And certainly, long before that, good people like Krzysztof. To me this is the truest truth of Christianity, even though it was regarded as unorthodox if not heretical. Perhaps we're given an inkling of this "secret ministry," as Coleridge calls it in a very different context, in the small coincidence of the icon that cries with the help of one who is rebelling against God. But it's up to us to repair the world after the unthinkable happens. If God did this for us it would hold no value.

Obviously I'm drifting into heresy but I think that the episode is also questioning the First Commandment itself. Is it really necessary to have no other gods? Why? Is science really a god? Do we really worship science as a false idol, or is science some-

thing else entirely? Is it really necessary for the First Commandment to come first, before the prohibition against murder? Why would God care if we worship, what we worship, or how? Does God intervene, and, if so, why, when, how, and for whom? If not, why not? Does God play favorites, as so many who worship believe to be the case? What's the story of the story here?

I haven't mentioned the Artur Barciś character, yet, who reappears throughout the *Dekalog* in various guises as a kind of angelic observer figure. In the first episode, this nameless figure is there weeping from the very beginning, if I recall correctly, sitting by a fire in a sheepskin jacket near the pond. He knows what's about to happen and yet he's fated only to observe, not to intervene. That makes him a little bit like the television viewer, and a little bit like an emissary of a very "hands off" divinity. But this idea is as disturbing as it is comforting, at least to me.

Notes from your friend JMT

May 26, 2020, 11:07 AM

Dear Josh,

I remember having an argument with you about *Dekalog* 1. Maybe we were in the car. I think it was on the way back from Richmond after we'd done the one-day screening of *Dekalog* you mention in your letter. Anyway, it was one of those pointless arguments we get into sometimes where neither of us are budging and your stubbornness and monomania starts to get deeply under my skin and my wicked tongue gets the better of me. Plus, I suspect we were both exhausted and sort of burned out and bamboozled from the all-day screening and the intensity of those films. Dark energies were released, for better or worse.

I bring it up because you had it in your mind to deny that *Dekalog* 1 is in any way about the fact that the son dies because the father is worshiping a false God with his computer and his calculations and what-not. I mean, you refused to acknowledge that this has anything to do with the film at all. This drove me nuts and I kept trying to force you to accept that this is, indeed, what happens in the film.

Of course, you were nuts. That is obviously the basic structure of the film and the obvious way in which the film is a dramatization of the First Commandment. But the more I think about it, the more I appreciate your resistance to that interpretation of the film and the more I think you are right that the film can't really be about that. I'm coming around to your point of view.

One thing about *Dekalog* 1 is that it just breaks my heart. Somewhere early in the film you start to feel in your gut that the kid is going to die. But you can't believe it will really happen. Later, you can't accept that his is the body dredged up from the pond. I suppose the genuine grief evoked in this film is some of the most potent grief to be found in any film that I know of. It is established in those short scenes in the beginning of the film where

the boy interacts so wonderfully with his father and so powerfully with his aunt. There is so much warmth in those scenes. It is intolerable that this boy is going to die, that Kieślowski is going to kill him. I still feel a residue of anger toward Kieślowski for doing that. He is the heartless and evil God in this case. How could he have done it? How could he have taken our Paweł away from us?

I sort of hate *Dekalog* 1.

If it is simply the case that Krzysztof is being punished for his false worship by the death of Paweł, then God is evil and we're done. Full stop. We are in an evil universe. God is a monster. Get out of this shitshow however you can and as fast as you can.

But I think you are right that this has little to do with what the film is actually exploring. What if the First Commandment is not really a commandment in the traditional sense at all? What if it is more like a statement of certain conditions. More and more I am convinced that in reading scripture, any kind of scripture, holy writings, you have to be as loose and flexible and creative in your thinking as are the texts themselves. You have to play, up and down the register and with leaps and shifts all over the place. Where's the poetry of the text actually taking us? And might not another work of art, like a film, often be better able to search out the unthought elements of the scripture than any traditional form of exegesis?

What if the point of the First Commandment is that it is showing us something about the tragic structure of the world, the universe? You shall have no God before me is not a threat or a potential punishment. As you say, it is kind of strange when you look at it that way. Why is God so jealous, so petty? But when you look at it as the poetic revelation of a state of affairs, the situation changes. God is saying that there is no way out of the bind. Life will proceed, in part, tragically, no matter what we do. No lesser God, i.e., no other technique or skill or mastery is go-

ing to shift us out of that basic condition. *Anankē*, Fate, rules at a higher level. There are things that are simply going to happen. God the Father is not a being in the universe looking over the situation and deciding whether to intervene or not. Not really. That's just a metaphor and a rather clumsy one at that. Useful maybe here and there. But a very limited and mostly not useful metaphor. The metaphor that the First Commandment suggests is more like the thoughts of Anaximander and other Presocratics. Again, call it Fate. Call it *Moirā*, call it *Anankē*, call it God the Father. There is a Way Things Are and Will Be that thwarts and resists every other force, that is somehow beyond the possibility of being fully contained, constrained, reined in, whatever. The locusts will come. The plague will come. Ours is not to control that fact, but simply to deal with what happens once Fate has sent whatever it has sent. The First Commandment names this force, names this state of affairs. You will have no other God before me means that in the last instance Fate will have its way. There is no because here, no why. It isn't the punishment for anything. It isn't something you can change or amend.

Sometimes, Paweł will die.

This is a tragedy in the full sense of the term. There is no way to out-think it. There is no way to make sense of it. Fate cannot be outmaneuvered. That doesn't mean that we throw up our hands and consign everything to Fate. There are different forces in the world and there are nine more commandments. Life is governed by many gods. But the God of Fate is the most terrible Face of God.

Or something like this. Do you see what I mean?

with love in the face of fate,

morgan



May 29, 2020, 12:52 PM

Dear Morgan,

Fair points all round in your letter, although my own memories focus on the wonderful things, like the undergraduate audience for our *Dekalog* screenings who brought their sleeping bags and pillows to the last few episodes as midnight approached. But sometimes a good fight over a film is clarifying. Heaven knows that my own household has been in a long-running... *conversation*... about von Trier in which I have been utterly routed and defeated for my idiocy many times over the years. That said, may all our future cinematic disputes be agreeable ones, salud! What's notable to me is how much films *matter*, full stop.

It's funny how stupid ideas (I mean mine, not yours) can be illuminating sometimes. Obviously, *Dekalog* 1 reveals our faith in modern science and rationality to be a form of idolatry. But, I stand by my blinkered, dunderheaded assertion that Paweł does not die *because* of Krzysztof's worship of a false god, that wonderfully strange green-screen 1980s personal computer that cannot answer any of our deeper questions about dreams, mystery, love, and, yes, as you say, fate. Like our minds, which are infinitely more complicated by comparison, the machine simply doesn't have enough wires and cannot make sufficient connections due to its lack of information — and wisdom.

This reading means that Krzysztof is not being *punished* by a jealous, ridiculous, petty, capricious, and vindictive god, as you rightly note. Instead, it's simply this: What must happen must happen. (And *not* "whatever will be, will be.") I like your take on the Presocratics in this regard, although I don't know enough about that to comment. Avidly reading through your letter a second time, I also wonder if there is a perspective beyond the tragic. I believe so, much as I admire and respect your point of view. I cannot account for this belief, which might not even be a belief in the strict sense, but, rather, feels more like a personal

temperament or mood. Maybe because I'm so prone to severe depression I need to cling to this belief, but I do not mean to protest too much, since you might feel differently, and for very good reasons. We cannot see everything *sub specie aeternitatis*, which apart from everything else requires zooming out too far from personal tragedy (and joy) into a remote galactic viewpoint that can seem way too cold and distant. We can try, but this might involve traveling in the wrong direction.

*Dekalog* offers stunning leaps of compassion about all of these fraught situations in which we find ourselves as the collective residents of this same tower block of apartments in the city we all share in various overlapping ways. However, the series requires a challenge to the First Commandment itself, since that Commandment tends towards anthropomorphizing the divine, risks corroding God's all-goodness, and creates a confusing, superficial impression of a worst-of-both worlds deity who talks out of both sides of their mouth in *Dekalog* 1. So, on some level, we're supposed to believe that God is simultaneously condemning an innocent child to death without lifting a finger to help him, and then sending Artur Barciś to cry about it in his sheepskin, and, finally, daubing a bit of wax on a painting to mark a gesture of grief? This makes no sense whatsoever. So I can see why you hate the episode, since on the surface it seems to portray God, if God exists, as being *unworthy of worship*. Again, this is different from atheism, although more atheists fall into this category than you might think.

One of the more interesting takeaways from the resentful and irritable classicists who study early Christianity, like Robin Lane Fox, in his book *Pagans and Christians* (1986), is that Christianity altered human subjectivity by shifting the blame for tragedy away from the gods, and their chaotic conflicts, and towards individual or collective sin as an all-encompassing explanation for why bad things happen to good people. And the concept of tragedy cannot be used as a political cudgel for justifying inaction in the face of (or, worse, passive acceptance of) oppression.

Historically this feels like a valid critique and it helps to explain why we're supposed to blame ourselves for things that aren't our fault, which is one of the more toxic legacies of our canonical tradition. Ironically, this way of structuring experience and autobiography is one that most *secular* folks fully and unwittingly embrace as well: We got cancer because we ate too much pizza or didn't drink enough kombucha; we're wrong 'uns if we don't jog; being fat or sick or depressed or crazy is a moral failing; etc.

This worldview is based on a very limited idea of the divine and a poorly grasped conception of how God, if God exists, might or might not reveal their divinity or operate within people. And Jesus himself wasn't ecstatic about some of the interpretations of the First Commandment, either. Where Jesus got into trouble was when he broke the Sabbath and then denied doing so — in short, he was accused of breaking various Commandments. In Matthew 22, the Pharisees try to trip up Jesus by asking him about the “greatest commandment.” Jesus cuts through the knot of the question by reading the First Commandment as inseparable from what's now called the Great Commandment:

Master, which is the great commandment in the law?  
 Jesus said unto him, thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all  
 thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.  
 This is the first and great commandment.  
 And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor  
 as thyself.  
 On these two commandments hang all the law and the  
 prophets.

This departs productively from the ideas about having no other gods and about graven images in the Decalogue. And Paul chimes in on a similar note in Galatians 5, claiming that the whole of the Law is fulfilled in the sentence “love thy neighbor as thyself.” To love one's neighbor is to love God, boom, drop the mic.

Jacques Derrida wrote an interesting book, *The Gift of Death* (1992), connecting Kierkegaard's reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac to this seemingly intractable tension between loving one's neighbor as oneself and having no other gods before God. I think Derrida respects the conundrums and paradoxes we are discussing, noting that the seeming contradiction between these two directives drives a lot of religiously motivated violence (as well as the mutual contempt that often marks exchanges between believers and non-believers, I might add). Derrida offers a potential way in to the aporia that seems to exist between these Commandments. He formulates an alternative maxim worth consideration, and worth the definition of good philosophy, in my view: "Every other (one) is every (bit) other." This is not mere linguistic gymnastics or deconstructive sophistry, I don't think. Instead it's a borderline postsecular assertion that we might attempt to encounter in others their radical otherness (normally reserved for God) rather than smashing their faces in (in order to serve God). Since in life, unlike in the Bible, no angel ever arrives to stay our hand when we slay or attack another person, we must attempt to stay our own hands.

Does the First Commandment truly help us to do this? Not a rhetorical question.

This, then, is not the God of Bob Dylan's "Highway 61," who demands that a father sacrifice his son and then notes, in a rather cavalier adaptation of Biblical texts, "You can do what you want, Abe / but the next time you see me comin' you better run." While the events in *Dekalog 1* don't take up any clear parallels with the Abraham and Isaac story, the father-son relationship and the death of the son at the hands of a Moloch-like false god, Krzysztof's computer, seem to blend these stories and sources together somewhat.

Another intriguing dimension — perhaps the most intriguing of all, in a way — is that the computer sometimes acts like a substitute mother for Paweł, but one that fails its motherly duties

by not keeping him safe. It gives him poor “advice,” one might say, while his real mother is too distant (in another time zone, and already asleep when Krzysztof and Paweł are querying the computer about dreams) to help him. Some of the same or similar questions get posed and reposed in various ways throughout the series: What’s a family, what’s a mother, what’s a father, and whose child is whose? What’s missing from this world is a mother (in the widest possible sense, and with an attempt at awareness of the dubious gender dynamics involved in making this claim). Not the cult of domesticity but rather the associations with fierce protection of children and especially the tending to the dying and the dead, as in the New Testament and classic mythology.

Irena knows this and does her best for her nephew Paweł, but her scope of action is limited. Her grief offers an alternative to Krzysztof’s anger, one grounded in faith. Her tears parallel those of the Madonna with the wax dripping from her eye, and those of the Artur Barciś character as well. Tears are not the end-point for her, we trust, but rather the beginning of a process of attempting to repair the world. Beyond the traditional limits of gender, this process feels like mothering to me, if I may put it that way.

What I am trying to ask is, can we change fate (to use your term)? Does our limited conception of fate blind us from what might be possible? How do we square the circle of God’s omniscience, if God exists, with human free will? If the faithful gather together with the faithless to create change for the better, is that foreseen or preordained? If the faithful or the faithless destroy others and themselves, does that have something to do with their beliefs, in general, or the First Commandment, in particular? Believers express their faith that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good, but these three attributes appear to be irreconcilable, not only between themselves but also as reflected in the world. I say “appear” for a reason, because our brains are too small to understand. At least mine is....

The future is everything and I cannot know if it already exists or what that might mean, even. I do recognize and respect that faith is not faith if the outcome is certain — or known — to us. It is the opposite, on every possible level, of operating a computer program, I imagine. So what we mean by omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, and all goodness is, equally, severely limited. In particular, our ideas of divine goodness are probably puny at the best of times, since God, if God exists, and if God has these attributes, is the ultimate player of the long game. Maybe it's all about God's faith in us rather than our faith in God?

These paradoxes are too complex for me. I am utterly defeated by the equations of general relativity and the concept of spacetime and the full implications of Spinoza's remarks about "god or nature" as "one being," or "by reality and perfection I understand the same thing." I retreat in abject failure from these scattered notes with an even deeper awe in the face of the *Dekalog's* ability to ask all these impossible, vital questions. To think that Paweł isn't real and didn't die! Wojciech Kłata, the actor who portrayed him, just a few years younger than us, remains alive and well. He's roughly our age. I just read that he acted in both *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Boys Don't Cry* (2000).

Fate, blind chance, destiny, double predestination, happenstance, coincidence, serendipity, kismet, synchronicity; the lucky and the cursed; one's lot in life versus the triumph of death; the work of the sisters of the fates and the daughters of night (especially Lachesis) — proceed with caution, guided by any name you prefer. I recognize that these words and the concepts and the stories and ideas associated with them are not at all identical by any means. But all of them seem relevant to *Dekalog 1* and perhaps even more so to *Dekalog 2*, don't you think?

Notes from yr friend JMT

June 3, 2020, 11:07 AM

Dear Josh,

But Paweł did die! Paweł *is* real. I watched him live and die again just the other day. That some guy named Wojciech Klata is still alive is no consolation to me.

Anyway, the last few lines of your letter do indeed spill nicely into *Dekalog* 2. I'm digging the idea that each of these films is a riff on the Ten Commandments as specific aspects of the divine encountered in actual life. *Dekalog* 1 is the way that we encounter the hard side of fate. The world will be the way that the world is and there are limits, hard limits, to our ability to alter this. Some things are unalterable, in short. That's all well and good to say in the abstract. But what does it actually look like? How does it actually feel? *Dekalog* 1 gives us that look and feel. It's the rough edge of life as tragedy, tragedy not just as a bad thing that happens, but a bad thing that *must* happen. Life is full, actually, with this aspect of the divine. It is one of the deeply non-serious sides of modern life that we have little chance simply to lament, to recognize that no one is really at fault, to surrender to the bigger forces that govern all life and to acknowledge that the arena in which we do exert any control or choice is actually quite a small one. In this, the ancient peoples probably had it right. The first Commandments are the Commandments that stress our lack of power and control. It is only in the later Commandments that we come into the realm of human autonomy, which is a limited and provisional autonomy at best.

Right now I'm seeing the Second Commandment (don't take the Lord's name in vain, in the Catholic numbering) as a kind of slightly softer version of the First Commandment. But the point here is still about control, about authority and sovereignty, is it not? There's a kind of usurping that is going on in taking the name of God in vain. One ceases, basically, to take God seriously. You use the name of God, the idea of God as a tool or

a weapon to get what you want. Here, one has lost the fear of God. But it is important to fear God, to fear the absolute vibrating totality of the Big Other, that which completely outstrips our possibility of grasping, understanding. This is the God of the Tetragrammaton, the name that cannot be spoken, the God Who Is Who They Are, whose face cannot be looked upon, who is the burning of the burning bush and the whisper that comes to Elijah. This is some shit that, shall we say at the very least, cannot and should not be taken lightly. These are the mysteries of name and identity that govern the highest things and, for human beings, tend to arise around matters of life and death and of mourning and grief and therefore also around birth, coming to be and passing away.

It is interesting that *Dekalog 2* deals with all such issues. And it deals with them according to an essential mystery, a fear and trembling before the question of who gets to live and who gets to die. I don't wish, actually, to pull apart the specific plot points of the film and try to explain them. Because I think the greatest strength of the film is that it conveys a kind of mood, a mood in which we are in the very presence of Death and therefore also of Life. The fact that Kieślowski managed to capture that little shot of the bee circling around the rim of the cup and almost falling to its death. May we say, just for a minute here, that that bee is one of the best actors in the entirety of the whole *Dekalog* series? She's clinging onto the handle of the spoon and almost falls into the liquid jam like three or four times, just toying with us. That bee, she has an amazing sense of drama. I don't know the degree to which Kieślowski manipulated the bee in that scene, or how many times they tried to get her in and out of the jam. But there is only so much coaching you can give to a bee. You probably know more about the backstory of the bee than I do. But this, to me, is the genius of Kieślowski's filmmaking and the degree to which he is a person of faith. That's to say, put doctrines aside. This is a man who has faith that the world will do what the world does and that his films will be provided for. The bee will come when the bee needs to come. Roberto Rossellini



is another filmmaker who comes to mind as having this kind of faith. Get out there with the camera and more will happen than you could ever have dreamed. The film will almost make itself. Or it will be made. It will be made through your willingness to let it be made through you.

This very idea of how to make a film is tied up with the lesson of the Second Commandment. You cannot take hold of the name of God and use it for your own purposes. No, the name of God works in and through you. It makes you, you don't make it. Here we are again in the realm of Thea Moira, the very Thea Moira that Plato names as the agent of creation in the *Ion* dialogue, which was, it ought to be mentioned, the very dialogue that Shelley most responded to in his attempt to explain what it going in the act of poetic creation.

The doctor in *Dekalog 2* is another character who, for very damn good reasons, by the way, having to do with his own confrontation with tragedy, but he's another character who is essentially closed off to the force of the divine name. He is no longer a vessel for Thea Moira. He has closed himself down. He is, in essence, a version of the father from *Dekalog 1* after the tragedy of losing his son. He has been deadened, closed down, shut off by the tragedy and the loss that has collapsed his own life. He no longer recognizes that, as a physician, he is in direct contact with the most august matters of life and death, the mystery of coming into being and passing away. He can't feel it anymore. The events of *Dekalog 2* bring him back into the realm of maturing. Not control. He cannot determine fate. But he can be a vessel once again. He can tremble before the divine name knowing that forces beyond his ken are flowing in and through his person.

One of the things that most moves me about *Dekalog 2* is the extent to which the doctor subtly changes from the beginning to the end of the film. It is not a spectacular change. But he has softened. His hardness of heart has softened into something else, a

willingness to be the vessel. His eyes are softer, his face is softer. It is an amazing performance, actually, almost as wonderful as the bee! The doctor is standing outside of life at the beginning of the film and he is standing on the inside again by the end. He's regained his fear and awe of the stupendous magnitude of the divine name. Without saying so explicitly, he has submitted himself again to the Second Commandment.

in fear and trembling,

morgan

June 6, 2020, 11:13 AM

Dear Morgan,

Kieślowski's bee! Yes, I think it attended the Actor's Studio and studied The Method under Pacino. Sorry for the flippancy, I think you have a good bead on this crucial turning point in the series as an expression of fate and the tragic structure of life. How do we handle the impossible situations we're dealt? What a scene. After being declared a terminal cancer case by his doctor, a man, Andrzej (Olgierd Łukaszewicz), mysteriously gets better after watching a bee that has fallen into a jar of strawberry preserves crawl out, clean off its wings, and survive. Will this latter-day Lazarus be made happy by his earthly resurrection? Or is this seemingly providential outcome being ironized insofar as Andrzej is rejoining a world (and a wife, Dorota [Krystyna Janda]) that no longer wants him? Are we to believe that Andrzej sees a "sign" in the bee, or that he's inspired to fight for his life, like the bee? Or is this simply a visual analogue to a process of survival taking place within and without?

The first-time viewer remains focused on the doctor character (Aleksander Bardini), who I don't think is named. The doctor's namelessness lends additional weight to his role as an everyman and leads to the reading you suggest about the Second Commandment. Dorota demands that the doctor swear that her husband is certain to die. All the indications point in that direction. She's pregnant by her lover, not her husband, and she's told him that she will cancel her scheduled abortion if her husband dies. If her husband survives, she does not wish to have the baby. The doctor, who is religious but says he believes in a "private god," is left in a moral crucible by Dorota's painful request.

The Artur Barciś character reappears in this episode as a lab tech or assistant in the hospital who is rendered wide-eyed by the events they are witnessing. *Dekalog 2* also exists in larger networks of stories and characters unfolded later on in the se-

ries. The events depicted here will be recapitulated as a textbook story in a philosophy class in *Dekalog* 8 as an example of a moral dilemma. And the leitmotif of the postal service and postage stamps that plays out in *Dekalog* 6 (also the basis for *A Short Film about Love* [1988]), and again, in a different form, in *Dekalog* 10, begins here.

What amazes me about this episode and the bee scene in particular is that it cuts against the grain of Hollywood storytelling and its notions of what it might mean to root for the protagonist of a film. What the studios were producing in 1988 were box-office hits like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, *Big*, *Three Men and a Baby*, and *Die Hard*. Nothing against those films in particular, but one can see why Kubrick and other filmmakers went crazy for Kiesłowski in this context of filmmaking at the very end of the Cold War.

I mention the historical context once again because I think that Kiesłowski is one of those artists whose work encapsulates an entire era. In this case, by importing the deeper concerns of religious life into Polish television (with West German funding), he was challenging communism in a sense that never broaches open warfare and which assiduously avoids any sustained political markers on the surface. However, one counterbalancing fact worth noting is that, vis-à-vis the moral dilemma portrayed in *Dekalog* 2, it was only during the communist era that abortion was fully legalized and relatively unrestricted. Abortion is now mostly banned in Poland, I think, and the impetus for the changes in the law have been religious in their motivation. I do not think *Dekalog* 2 is primarily “about” abortion, but I also don’t see this as an irrelevant sidebar.

Simultaneously, by rejecting Hollywood filmmaking as a commercial enterprise in which the audience cheers on a likeable character to victory against the odds, Kiesłowski also implicitly rejects the capitalistic model of movie-making. Here, we meet a leading woman (Dorota) who runs over her doctor’s dog, tells

him that she wishes she had run *him* over, and then corners him into an excruciating, unsolvable situation involving infidelity and abortion. Nobody is going to be “happy” in the sense promised by the end credits of films produced in Los Angeles.

Dorota is a woman of a kind that Hollywood has rarely accepted in any era: strong, angry, loving, and in an agonizing situation lacking in moral clarity. Kieślowski’s women characters almost always feel modern regardless of the year in which they are screened. Hollywood’s false idea of providence involves rewarding characters for making the right “life decisions,” and framing its narratives within melodramatic genre storytelling, so that the viewer is almost always certain they know what is right and wrong. That’s out the window here.

Kieślowski’s rejection of the dominant ideologies of his day is humanistic rather than directly political, but it is pointed and consistent. In a sense, one might even argue, without disrespect, that he died at the right time, in 1996, before Hollywood offered him a truly Faustian bargain as a filmmaker with potential Oscar ambitions. The evil shadow of Harvey Weinstein passes across Kieślowski’s later career, with Miramax acting as the distributor of Kieślowski’s 1990s films. Kieślowski devotees already loathed “Harvey Scissorhands,” without knowing anything about his sex crimes, because of Miramax’s grotesque interpolation of a melodramatic father-daughter hug tacked on to the American release of *The Double Life of Veronique*. Wasn’t Kieślowski’s renunciation of filmmaking in the 1990s well-timed, too? It might be an exaggeration to read this withdrawal from movies as proof of resistance to the Third Way of filmmaking in 1990s America, but I do think it’s relatively well-known that Miramax was keen on producing a new Kieślowski cycle of films set in Hollywood involving the themes of Heaven and Hell. I’d like to mythologize the great artist as one who rejected the Devil himself (“all these things will I give thee...”), but I don’t know if biographical scholarship would bear out that hope of mine.

My term for Kieślowski's filmmaking would be "a cinema of unknowing." Hollywood tends toward giving us the answers to all of our questions. It offers knowledge, information, or message-making in pill form. If we think about Hollywood filmmaking, *we know* who to root for, *we know* who's in love with whom, and *we know* who committed the series of grisly murders by the end of the film.... Melodramatic narrative structure requires an *end to mystery*. This is what I would call "the cinema of knowing." These stories satisfy an impulse towards escape and closure, and we cannot expect commercial cinema to do otherwise than to supply what's in demand. Of course, there is sometimes a difference between commercial cinema and popular cinema — *Dekalog*, for example, was broadcast on television and probably reached millions of people.

We know that life isn't really like the movies. People are mysterious and unknowable. Love is inexplicable, vast, cosmos-shakingly splendid, and sometimes, tragically self-destructive. What about the questions that have no answers, or the varieties of experience that, while common, appear inexplicable, and which we refer to variously as the uncanny, the supernatural, or the divine? These are the kinds of experiences that Kieślowski explored in the 1980s and 1990s. For me, these films contain resonances of spirituality while posing questions and presenting mysteries that have no clear answers — and which I don't think his cinema attempts to solve. We are left to wonder, not to know. Instead, we are made to unknow things we thought we knew. Another cinema is possible, with a different relationship to narrative structure and characterization.

If I call Kieślowski's filmmaking a "cinema of unknowing," I mean to gesture to the 14th-century English mystical text *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which advocates contemplating the divine through other means than the reifying, blundering, and clumsy, overrated human faculty of the intellect. God "can well be loved, but he cannot be thought," according to *The Cloud of Unknowing*. "By love he can be grasped and held, but, by thought, neither

grasped nor held.” (I think there’s a modernized translation of *The Cloud* that uses the word “embraced” rather than “grasped.”)

Something potentially supernatural is often going on in many of Kieślowski’s films, at least as many of his characters experience things. Geoff Andrew summarizes Kieślowski’s outlook in his book:

Kieślowski belongs to the small number of filmmakers — most notable are Dreyer, Rossellini, Bresson, Bergman, and Tarkovsky — who have attempted to explore, through a medium that is by its very nature materialistic and confined to the visual reproduction of physical surfaces, a world that is obscure, metaphysical, and transcendental. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Kieślowski differed from Bresson and Rossellini in not being a Catholic, and from the Lutheran-raised Bergman in not being anguished, it seems, by the ‘silence’ of God. While refusing ever to describe himself as ‘Religious with a capital R,’ he hated organized religion — he would, if pressed, admit to being ‘religious’ only in that, ‘I do think something exists beyond this ashtray, this glass, this microphone.’ [...] It was, first and foremost, his ability to evoke those mysterious forces and our reaction to them, that made him one of the greatest filmmakers in the history of the cinema.

According to Andrew, Kieślowski put it this way in an interview about *The Double Life of Veronique*: “The realm of superstitions, fortune-telling, presentiments, intuition, dreams, all this is the inner life of a human being, and all this is the hardest thing to film....”

A detour into *Blue* is in order, I think. As in *Dekalog*, specific Biblical texts inform the first film of the *Three Colors*. Kieślowski weaves the ending of *Blue* around St. Paul’s words from 1 Corinthians about how “if I have not love, I am nothing.... If I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am

nothing.” We all know these words of Paul from weddings, but I think they are worth repeating any time:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

So love supersedes what Paul calls knowledge. Paul’s word for garden-variety knowledge is *gnosis*, which according to Biblical commentators is contrasted throughout his letters with another word, *epignosis*, which denotes a stronger and more spiritual understanding of God. The point is that there are different kinds of knowing.

*The Cloud of Unknowing* conveys a somewhat similar stance against intellectualization, this “knowledge” that will “pass away.” The modernized translation of *The Cloud* calls this “hyper-analytical” knowledge or intellect, which sounds conceptually useful if somewhat anachronistic.

Another point of contact here with Kieślowski is that both Paul and *The Cloud* remain true to Jesus’s saying that the whole of the Law is to love — and specifically to love thy neighbor as thyself. The meaning of love and its connection to one’s neighbors, to self-seeking forms of modern freedom, as well as to other Pauline themes of trust, hope, and protection, all form key elements of *Blue*. I think this connection is worth exploring in more detail since the idea of “neighbors” also lies at the center of *Dekalog*. After all, it is because they are neighbors that Dorota and the doctor come into contact, when he encounters her smoking on the stairs of their apartment building. (Thank you for indulging me on this already long-winded sidebar, by the way.)



In *Blue*, Julie (Juliette Binoche) is trying to cope with the trauma of the sudden deaths of her husband and their daughter in a car accident, which she has inexplicably survived. Her widowhood plays out very differently than Dorota's presumptive (but prematurely assumed) widowhood, but the theme of music provides another point of continuity between these films, since Dorota is a member of an orchestra and Julie is a composer. At first Julie reacts to death by withdrawing from society completely. She walls herself away from other people, seeking freedom in absolute solitude, and moving to an anonymous section of Paris. She throws away her musician husband's latest composition-in-progress, an incomplete symphony for the "reunification of Europe." We see his musical notes on the page being ground up in the garbage truck and assume that the symphony will be lost forever.

So Julie wishes to forget the past and to hide in her new apartment. From her window, she sees a stranger being beaten up on the street but refuses to answer when he tries to escape and knocks at her door. He's dragged away. But Julie gets another chance to be a good neighbor to a stranger in distress. She witnesses a woman being threatened with eviction because she's an exotic dancer, Lucille (played by Charlotte Véry). Lucille is also having an affair with another neighbor's husband. It is this modern-day Mary Magdalene figure who stirs Julie's empathy and makes her wish to reach out to the world again. Who is our neighbor and who is not? Who is worthy of love?

In forming a friendship with her neighbor, Julie finds her own self-seeking "freedom" (or so-called freedom) to be isolating, self-serving in Paul's sense. Unlike Dorota, who appears doomed, Julie eventually achieves healing and rebirth through the process of redefining her freedom (*Blue* being the color of the French flag that signifies liberty). She learns to embrace her connectivity with other people. Eventually she begins the process of finishing her late husband's symphony, along with another man who worked with her husband and who is also in

love with Julie. This hybrid work represents a merging of their artistic identities, one might say. Julie brings the music back into her soul, to employ a very clunky metaphor, by rejecting the modern, instrumental conception of freedom as self-sufficiency. She turns negative freedom — “freedom from constraint” — into positive freedom — “freedom to love.” Her victory exists as a bookend to Dorota’s defeat. Both outcomes in these respective films ring true; art provides no answers.

At the risk of trying your patience with a detour inside a detour, and on a much less lofty note, there are two more very intriguing and strange moments in *Blue* where Julie interacts — or, rather, fails to interact — with two people on the street. The first is a street musician and the second is a stooped old woman doing her recycling. In *Blue*, the film uses editing to reveal Julie’s reactions to both of these people. In the first scene, Julie, sitting at a cafe, notices the street musician playing the flute. He’s a curious figure who keeps reappearing in the film, minor but resonant, and, in this sense, he plays a similar role to the elderly woman with her recycling. In another scene Julie finds him sleeping on the street. Presumably he’s a talented musician but also an addict of some kind that prevents him from functioning in the professional world. She stops to touch him rather than passing by — *Blue* is the story of a woman learning to see, hear, and connect with other people as part of her grieving process. Again, this outcome exists as a counterweight to Dorota’s fate in *Dekalog 2*.

When Julie hears the street musician, she’s inevitably reminded of the symphony her husband was composing before his death. Music connects people together — it can make a stranger into a potential neighbor, one might say. Adding to Julie’s emotions at this point in the film is an additional complication that makes all the difference. We discover that, in fact, she had been working *all along as an uncredited collaborator* on her husband’s compositions. What the public considered “his” music was actually created by coauthorship. What is the self? What does it mean

to say that a work of art — a symphony or a film — is “by” one person?

As for the second sequence, with the elderly woman and her recycling, with Binoche again at a cafe, Mark Cousins argues in his 2011 documentary *The Story of Film* that this small moment in *Blue* is one of the great moments in the history of cinema. I agree. It is crucial, Cousins argues, to understanding the potential lying dormant in the cinema to act as what he calls an “empathy machine.” And empathy — if it involves the act of merging with another — is something we can equate on some level with love. To love thy neighbor as thyself, we must first *see* our neighbor, not just watch them, but truly see them as being connected to us, and then see all people as potential neighbors. *Blue* allows this to happen to the viewer, and later, to Julie, but not here, not yet.

On one level, Kieślowski might well take the opposite point of view from the mystical tradition, as expressed in works like *The Cloud of Unknowing*. If the goal of unknowing is to forget the world in a monastic setting, *Blue* seems to present this as a dead end by showing that Julie will not find what she seeks on her own in her little cell. Julie is no Julian of Norwich, although her progress involves a series of cinematic “Showings.”

On the other hand, if the goal of unknowing is to return us to a deepened sense of the world and everything in it — now viewed from a different perspective, one of compassion — then there is a paradox that is worth thinking about in comparing some of the classic religious texts with Kieślowski’s cinema. These enduring puzzles relate to what *The Cloud of Unknowing* describes as the “sister” paths of the active and the contemplative life. Julie takes the path that leads to rejoining the active life, and in fact the climax of the film uses her orgasmic reunion with her worldly lover as its resolution to the mystery of love. This is intercut with, among other things, Lucille contemplating a sex show, a mechanical and joyless facsimile of love, to be sure. In

some sense Kieślowski replaces Pauline love for something more carnal, even as he invokes its splendor and power and threads Paul's text on love into the warp and woof of his narrative. Is this a secularized update of Paul or something more blasphemous? Or is it holy after all?

Julie's husband's music is shown being ground up into the maw of the garbage truck, and the old woman is just trying to add her bottle to the recycling bin. Kieślowski uses these miniature dramas centered on *trash* to suggest that mysterious connections might exist between lives, places, and objects that most of us are not able to see, but which, his films suggest, are right before our very eyes. Very far from some exalted realm, these invisible webs are pointedly noticed amidst the garbage. (And Lucille is treated by her neighbors as if she were human garbage.) The banal is the exalted space in Kieślowski. All these people are trying to do is make one tiny gesture towards leaving the world a better place, even though they themselves are clearly running out of time. Are we all leading separate lives, or is there something that connects us together, and, if so, how do we best respect this mysterious something that binds us together? *Blue* poses these questions differently from *Dekalog*.

By the end of the film Julie has returned to life and feels inspired to finish her dead husband's music for the reunification of Europe. As I mentioned, it features a choral rendition of Paul. By means of this musical passage, Julie reaches out in three ways simultaneously: First, to her deceased husband by completing his music, and second, to the living man who has offered her love throughout the film, and who she has mostly rejected so far. Third, we see her write the words "flute solo" (*"flute sol"*) on the musical score! This is Julie's gesture of homage to the street musician we saw earlier, and to the music that moved her so deeply, which we also heard edited together with the sequence of the old woman and her recycling. (That magnificent score is by Zbigniew Preisner, who also wrote the haunting music for both *Dekalog* and *The Double Life of Veronique*, in which the role

of music in joining together people who do not know each other is also reprised.)

The viewer is left to reflect on certain questions after watching and rewatching *Blue*, and many of these questions are present in the *Dekalog* episodes as well, especially this one. Are uncanny forces at work in the universe after all, or is everything we've seen a beautiful form of human poetry and the accidental orchestration of events? Is continuity after death or surrounding death possible? If so, how? Is there some form of divine intervention, some manner of subtly inserting little annotations into the subtext of events and the universe for us to scry or to ignore, depending on our receptivity to them? Or are we witnessing something more like Carl Jung's concept of synchronicity unfold onscreen?

Should we seek out a secular explanation, a spiritual(ist) explanation, or a religious explanation for the events that unfold in these fictions? I think it is valuable to note the distinctions between these three things in Kieślowski's work, since each carries different demands with it, if I can put it that way. *Dekalog* and *Blue*, despite the radically contradictory outcomes they dramatize for their characters, preserve a delicate sense of balance between these three avenues of thinking (chance, fate, and divine intervention) about what we've seen. The films cannot be reduced to one or another of these "explanations," and that is, in my view, not a mistake on the part of the artist or a flaw in the films. By presenting Julie's and Dorota's narratives as fiction, Kieślowski doesn't have to answer metaphysical questions about the ultimate nature of reality. Instead he can remain true to his task of searching for and asking questions.

We're probably diverging in our basic orientation towards these films at this point, but, as you mentioned before, that's what is so interesting about exchanging these letters, so I don't take that as a bad sign, at all. Your point of view on the Commandments seems well-suited to *Dekalog 3* and its relationship to the mean-

ing of the Sabbath as a Holy Day. Feel free to demolish my ideas here before continuing, of course! But I would be delighted to read your response to the next episode. I think *Dekalog 3* is my favorite of these “panels” on Kieślowski’s cinematic altarpiece.

Again, thanks for listening to such an absurdly lengthy letter! Once I start thinking about Kieślowski I find it almost impossible to stop.

Notes from your friend JMT

June 8, 2020, 10:30 AM

Josh,

I'll take up the challenge of talking about *Dekalog* 3. I've noticed in much of the literature on *Dekalog* that *Dekalog* 3 tends to be especially mystifying to people because they can't figure out how it has any relationship to the Third Commandment (in the Catholic ordering). The Third Commandment is the commandment to remember the Sabbath day and to keep it holy. What does a story about a taxi driver who leaves his wife and child on Christmas Eve to go on an all-night wild goose chase around Warsaw with a woman he's been having an affair with have to do with keeping the Sabbath holy? It's a good question.

I think of this film as a Gnostic wrangle. What I mean is this: given the suffering of life, given how hard it can be just to get up and keep doing it, day after day, the Gnostic doubt is going to creep in sooner or later. The Gnostic doubt is basically the doubt that creation is worth anything at all. For the Gnostics, the situation here on earth is so bad that we are forced to conclude that the creator God is a false God. Creation is therefore a mistake, a terrible error. And Lord that it doesn't feel that way much of the time. To my mind, anyone who dismisses the Gnostics out of hand isn't paying attention, or is scared to face the strange mix of boredom and misery that characterizes more of our earthly hours than any of us would probably like to admit. If there is a chart somewhere that accurately counts the minutes of my life in which I've known anything like happiness or contentment versus the opposite it is a chart I don't ever want to see. For the Gnostics, then, the only way truly to be holy is to turn away from the falseness of the world and to commune with the spirit of the true God, who exists in utter and complete separation from earthly creation.

Of course, the problem with this approach to God and the world (however satisfying it might be in various ways) is that it is hard

to sustain without falling into complete despair. The true Gnostic, it seems to me, is always going to end up a suicide. Also, of course, for anyone espousing any sort of faith in the Abrahamic religions, the scriptures give a clear account of God creating the world and then declaring it good. From the Gnostic perspective, of course, those declarations are the declarations of the false God, the seriously deluded creator God, and can therefore be ignored. But this, to my mind, is to discard what is most radical, most challenging and incredible about what the Hebrew scriptures propose. The Hebrew scriptures propose that God creates the world, the cosmos, out of goodness and love. Really? What in the Hell? How does that jibe with our experience, which is of a creation shot through with malice, selfishness, violence, randomness, and the like? Ultimately, of course, there is no permanently satisfying answer to these doubts and worries. My faith flounders on these rocks all the time.

But what does all of this have to do with *Dekalog* 3 and with the Third Commandment? I think it centers around the issue of the Sabbath, the day of rest, and what the day of rest is really about. A time of rest is, by nature, a time of reflection and of introspection. As Genesis has it, every time God does a bit of creating, She also does a bit of reflecting, almost as if the two things go hand in hand in a kind of dance. Create a bit, step back, reflect, consider, go back in for some more creating, and so on.

And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called He Seas: and God saw that it was good.

And then a bit later:

And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

And so on and so forth. The Sabbath day, to put it simply, is just the institutionalization of this stepping back and reflecting and



seeing and declaring it good. It is the solidifying of this aspect of the process of creation into the rhythm of the week, as it were. It is a way, also, that we get to participate in the same dance of creation and reflection that, in the bigger cosmic sense, is the ongoing and infinite work of God, the work of which we are some small, individualized part.

The fact that God looks upon the creation and declares it good is, in a sense, impossible to understand. It is one of the chief outrages of the Hebrew scriptures and something that more realistic Middle Easterners of the time, people like the Assyrians, probably laughed at and ridiculed. It really is the height of self-delusion and wishful thinking. And yet. And yet. I also think it is one of the most beautiful thoughts that religion in any form has given us. It is, in a sense, the greatest thought. The thought is that all this is good. *This* is good. Not the beyond. Not some other place that we can dream about in its perfection, but this shit right here is good. Truth and goodness and beauty are right here, being created and recreated all the time, infinitely. To me, this is either deeply true in some impossible to fully explain way, or we should all blow our brains out right now. Literally, right now. Go out, get a pistol, and blammo. These are the only two options. To me, much of atheism is the attempt to pretend there is a third way. Nope. Either there is something fundamentally good here, and life is a quest to touch upon that goodness, or else it is a vast expanse of endlessly churning misery, in which case the only honest move is to get out now.

This is the dilemma, the stark and honest choice in the mind of Ewa in *Dekalog* 3 as she decides to trick her former lover into spending the night with her on Christmas Eve. She is having her own kind of Sabbath of deep reflection. She is testing God, which is a dangerous game. She is trying to find out if there is a reason to live and if Care will come her way. And she will kill herself if not. This is a sort of nasty thing to do, and rather unfair to Janusz, who has his own life, his own family, and who has not been warned that he will be the mechanism by which Ewa tests

God. But, that's the genius of Kieślowski, for this is an entirely plausible modern-day scenario in which we can see the deep question of whether creation is good or not playing itself out in the actual drama of human lives.

Ewa's actions bring both of them to the existential brink, literally. There is the scene where they are both in the car and Janusz decides to play a game of chicken with the oncoming tram. This is literally the moment in which one must choose life or death. The scene is amazing too in that Janusz first pulls into the path of the tram in a kind of frustration, almost like a game. But then it becomes real. I think we have all experienced moments like this. I wonder how many suicides actually start out this way. A game becomes real. Janusz veers out of the path of the tram at the last second. The tram is being driven, of course, by the "angel" figure who appears in most episodes of *Dekalog*.

I also find the scene in the drunk tank to be especially moving. A sadistic guard keeps spraying the naked drunks down with cold water. It is a difficult scene to watch. Here is a situation in which the coldness and the cruelty of existence, the complete lack of care is manifest. Finally, Janusz steps in and threatens the guard and stops the abuse. We understand, at this point, that this episode of *Dekalog* is not really about marital infidelity or romantic love. For all his failures as a man, as a husband and father, Janusz does have the capacity to act upon feelings of care, he has the capacity to give this to another human being. That is why Ewa has sought him out on this night above all others. He is going to be the mechanism by which God's providence is tested.

In the end, he stays with Ewa until morning. They do not resume their affair or engage in acts of romance. Janusz goes ahead with the fiction that they are searching for Ewa's husband, knowing that this is not true. Ultimately, he understands in his heart, if not his head, that she needs him to stay and that what they actually do throughout the night is of little importance. He must simply be with her, physically, and go through the travails of the

night until the sun comes up. This is what will allow Ewa to go on with life. It is a small thing, but it is also the largest thing. This is the fragment of care, the proof that there is goodness in the created world, a fragment that is large enough that Ewa can hang the rest of her life upon it.

So, they have shared a real Sabbath together. They have discovered that life is worth living because Care is real and it can be trusted. They have stepped back from creation and have, unexpectedly, through a freezing night in the depressing city of Soviet-era Warsaw, nonetheless been forced to “see that it was good.”

I think it is important that *Dekalog* contain this affirmation of the Sabbath. Because otherwise *Dekalog* is a testimony of Gnostic denial of the created world, a renunciation that has nagged at Christianity from the beginning and that nags at me. But if God is love then it can't be right that creation is just a hell, a punishment, a mistake. And we know that God is love because we've all experienced some version of the affirmation of life and care that Ewa experiences in her strange night with Janusz at the very brink.

with love, morgan

June 11, 2020, 9:55 AM

Dear Morgan,

Isn't it remarkable how much of what we call our philosophy of life comes from our personal temperament? One person looks at the image of the "deep field" of a thousand galaxies from the Hubble Telescope and sees a cosmic and indifferent beauty in which all meaning here on earth is human-created. Another sees God's Creation and a kind of pattern or wisdom guiding the whole swirl. Still another sees nothing but black holes, cold emptiness, and a grim predatory collision of dead matter. ("Chaos and murder," in the voice of the inimitable Werner Herzog in his film *Grizzly Man* [2005].) I've known jolly hedonist materialists and Marxists who deny the divine yet firmly believe, without any clear proof from history, that a more equitable future is possible. I've known suicidal atheists and Catholics so bleak in their vision of "final things" that they're almost convinced that this world is Hell itself, despite verging on blasphemy and heresy.

Some people think of killing themselves every day, others cyclically, and some rarely, or never. The idea of suicide — one of the key themes of *Dekalog 3* — might not occur to the lucky few. I'm not sure it has much to do with their religious beliefs, though. I had a relative, a Catholic, who lent me his paperback Kurt Vonnegut novels, and, in the process, helped me to think about becoming a writer. He drank radiator coolant, and lived, somehow. If I had been able to explain the enduring good he'd done for me, I'm not sure that would have helped him much, ultimately, since people in agony and despair also lose their ability to listen to and see the good in themselves and others.

Certainly, though, the "problem of evil" is perhaps *the* puzzle for monotheists. Not that suicide is necessarily evil in all circumstances, that's just the 101 theological terminology for all the bad stuff that can happen to people. The religious explanation for human suffering in monotheism isn't always very satisfy-

ing since it tends to impinge on God's all-goodness (and, as you point out, the goodness of Creation). God knows in advance of the suicide's plans and has the power to stop them, but does not do so. In *Dekalog* 3, it's significant, I think, that the Artur Barciś character appears in the guise of a tram driver when the ex-lovers Ewa (Maria Pakulnis) and Janusz (Daniel Olbrychski) come hurtling towards the tram in their car. The tram operates like fate — its course and its schedule does not alter — while the wheel of the car depicts the limited free will that we can exercise, perhaps? This is clunky but I'll let it stand for now, because I see a dynamic at work in *Dekalog* 3 related to our thread of conversations about fate, chance, and human decision. A similar dynamic applies to *Dekalog* 4, no?

As I mentioned previously, we might need to adjust our ideas about God's all-goodness in order to comprehend why one person is dealt a genetic matrix of severe depression or an abusive upbringing that makes them feel worthless every day — and another person is not. It's not that God *fails* to intervene but rather that God's understanding of goodness is vastly more complex than ours. It's not that God "pre-approves" tragedies in order to allow us to make good out of bad but rather that the meaning of humanity involves, on some basic level, this attempt to make something better. Smash up the car and the tram and we multiply and spread misery — this might be murder as well as suicide. Spend the night away from one's wife and family with a suicidal ex and, despite the surface-level wrongheadedness of this decision — Janusz's obvious immorality — one might participate in saving a life or repairing a little corner of the world. Janusz would never think of himself as a Christ-like figure, and in so many ways he is not. Yet the two figures share a hidden trait, breaking with all expectations of proper behavior on a day reserved for God in order to help another person in pain. Janusz comforts the prisoner, as you noted, in the drunk tank when they are being abused, and he helps restore the taste for life to Ewa, but does so by neglecting his own family, at Christmas.

It would be a *cruel* God that prevented either suffering *or* redemption, since this would remove much of what it means to be human and fully alive. It is God's goodness—you are right—that, for the monotheist, is the ultimate mystery. In a sense, we must act in order to prove this attribute of the divine, and the evidence for this attribute (or lack of it) depends on *our* actions. God entrusts us with the outcome, one might say.

In any event, in *Dekalog* 3, Janusz does right by doing wrong, and by breaking more than one ethical directive, risking losing his marriage and his family as well as his own life in the process. A decent outcome for him is only possible, of course, because of the forbearance of Janusz's wife (Joanna Szczepowska), who, in her grace, somehow knows to trust Janusz on some ultimate level. She's the real hero of this story, in a sense.

As for the Third Commandment: The Holy Night of Christmas Eve, on which the third episode of the series is set, is, in a way, the Sabbath of all Sabbaths. If there is a place to mark hope for something better, an end to the infinite winter and its waves of grief and sorrow, it is here. A moment for glimpsing what's worthwhile. Janusz confronts a Janus-faced night that heralds the advent of January and the new year as well as celebrating the birth of Jesus. There will be another year and a chance to make good, to strengthen relationships and heal our wounds. Non-believers understand why the birth story of Jesus needs to dovetail, miraculously, one might say, with the pagan ceremonies involving the return of light to the world after the darkest and shortest days of the year. On some plant-like level, is it just our distance from and planetary orientation towards the sun that exerts so much force on our mood?

As you suggest, it's not just a matter of rediscovering the good in the world and in ourselves, it's also about releasing ourselves from our fantasy of controlling events. Suicide, in a way, forms the most desperate illusion of control, in that we select the end-point of our life by cutting it short rather than accepting the

time (and the suffering, or the potential for something other than suffering) that has been allotted to us. And, what's worst, suicide is a decision that inflicts suffering on everyone we've ever known or loved — suffering they must experience as long as they live, but which we do not have to experience anymore. Sometimes people are simply in too much pain to want to keep living, and moralizing about that in some abstract way would be ridiculous and offensive. But often suicide only makes sense as an act of revenge.

Yet for all this, one of the wonders of the *Dekalog* is seeing how the series undercuts its own heaviness or at least offers unexpected juxtapositions and surprising turns that act as counterpoints to the main narratives. In *Dekalog* 3, that aspect of the series takes the form of the skateboarding young woman who works at the train station where Ewa and Janusz wind up near the end of their orphic journey into the abyss. This nameless and delightful character appears only for a minute or two, and then vanishes from the *Dekalog* forever. But for this very reason, she's an eternal figure who, with her skateboard and her PKP (Polish State Railways) uniform and cap, permanently marks my memory of the *Dekalog* as a viewing experience. She's an utterly charming and intelligent person we'd like to know better. Probably some viewers would agree to marry her on the spot without requiring any additional information.

She's a nameless "railway employee" played by Dorota Stalińska. Serendipities abound on Stalińska's Polish-language Wikipedia page, including mention of her intriguingly titled book of poems, *Unfaithful Time*, and a telling anecdote about the actor's appearance "skipping rope" in front of "a Warsaw block of flats" in a 1984 series of photos for British *Newsweek* by Chris Niedenthal promoting the "global popularity of fitness." It might be fanciful but one can imagine Kieślowski's mind tumbling over this image and finding a place for Stalińska in the *Dekalog* as a representation of this image of young Poland.

Clearly, I have a celebrity crush on Dorota Stalińska! But my reasons for mentioning her role in *Dekalog 3* aren't entirely trivial. What's she doing there? Why the skateboard? Certainly there's a funny juxtaposition between her communist-era uniform and her freewheeling hobby of patrolling the Warsaw station on her board in order to stave off the loneliness of the bureaucratic winter night. What ought to be a joyless and depressing government job suddenly springs to life with the application of an activity that falls on the spectrum somewhere between sport and play. In the last place on earth where we might expect to find a game being played, the graveyard shift in a broken train system, Stalińska has created some fun by breaking the rules. There's a subtle sense in which we might detect or predict the end of communism in this image. The system cannot withstand such room for play much longer.

Some people seem to be unaccountably okay whereas others are stalked by misery and the constant thought of death. Again, I think this is a matter of temperament, even if our basic outlook is deeply shaped by our circumstances, upbringing, ideology, beliefs, and genetic inheritance. The nameless railway employee reminds me of the basic unfairness of our various lots in life and the undeniable fact that our brains contain the hand we're dealt and have to play in life, even if we might be able to draw new cards and modify our hands, so to speak, discarding some cards and adding others. Some people somehow find the fun in what should be bleak and others manage to ruin the happiness they've built up over years in a single self-destructive moment. This is a basic human mystery, but one that takes on additional frisson, beauty, heartbreak, tragedy, and complexity if we attempt to reconcile it with the idea of a divine presence that watches over us.

A tangle of mysteries regarding nature and nurture (yet another matrix for exploring destiny and free will)! Does this seem like a decent entry-point to the difficult moral quandaries portrayed



in *Dekalog* 4? Or, how do you see that troubling, daring episode operating within the larger series?

Notes from your friend JMT

June 12, 2020, 12:26 PM

Josh,

Your most recent letter is filled with many moving thoughts, my favorite of which must, of course, be your extended love note to Dorota Stalińska. It's true that something marvelous happens in that brief scene where she rides up on the skateboard. Like a warm Spring breeze somehow flows into the film, even with all the dark and gloom of the deep Polish winter. These are the little miracles of *Dekalog*, the unexpected moments and the elements that a more controlling sort of director might not give space to. You can't imagine a more economical filmmaker, someone like Ozu, letting things just sort of erupt into the structure of a film as Kieślowski does. Not that Ozu is therefore any less of an artist. It is just a different sense of what film does. A different kind of faith in the process.

This faith gets another strange and interesting twist in *Dekalog* 4. For all the difficulties in watching many of the other *Dekalog* films (will the murder of the taxi driver in *Dekalog* 5 ever actually end?), there is something so profoundly disturbing in watching *Dekalog* 4. It is a film about incest. The scenes where the daughter tries to seduce her father are excruciating. But those scenes also contain some of the tenderest moments Kieślowski ever captured on film. There is a scene where the father gently pulls his daughter's shirt down to cover up the skin of her back. It is him saying no to the sexual temptation. But it is also the act of an adult taking care for a child. The overlapping and confusion between these two modes, sex and parenting, seems utterly and completely wrong and utterly and completely honest at the same time. Cinematically, Kieślowski pushes this awkward tension in every scene in the film. In your heart, you know that there is something wrong in the very first scene, where father and daughter are playing around at home, splashing water over one another as an Easter morning prank. But the play feels too much like flirting. It is flirting.

The deeper spiritual truth being uncovered in *Dekalog* 4, at least to my mind, is related to the biblical injunction to “honor one’s father and mother.” It’s that being human is being involved in a relationship of care with one’s fellow human beings that often demands that we act counter to what we really want, or think we want, or are compelled toward by the power of our desires. The parent/child version of this problem is the highest apex of this dilemma. And Kieślowski was brilliant enough to see that the dilemma is probably at its most confusing from the perspective of the child. Because once the child starts to grow up, once her desires change from needing the non-sexual love of the provider to the potentially sexual love of the adult world, where does that leave the previous feelings of love? Or is there ever such a clear divide in the first place, even in infancy? Isn’t this intense and sometimes all-consuming love between parents and children always necessarily mixed up with all the other feelings, some of them out and out sexual, that draw us toward one another? God is love, yes. But also God is profoundly weird, infinitely unsettling. So love too is weird, unsettling, disturbing. The forces that draw us together, the forces that make us fall into one another, to want one another, to want to get into one another’s bodies, to make the other person moan, to lick and suck and fuck one another, these are forces that are hard to control, hard to direct, hard to differentiate. And yet we are called also to do that. The idea, expressed in its purest form by the true libertine, that we cast off our “false” sexual distinctions and live in a realm of total sexual freedom is just as much an impossible fantasy as the misguided religious fantasy that we can somehow extricate and eliminate the desires of the flesh. The love that is God is the love that is always already mixed-up. You can care for someone in the tenderest way and also, in some part of yourself, want to fuck them into the wall or be fucked by them into the wall.

Somehow, to be human, really and truly human, is to acknowledge all of this, the strange brew of love and desire and care, and to come through it with the ability to make important distinc-

tions, to protect some relationships from some forms of desire and to fit the right desire to the right context. That is what the commandment is about at its heart. The commandment is telling us that we are structured as the sorts of creatures for whom the experience of loving and wanting will sometimes be experienced as a crucible. It matters, therefore, what we do. We are not the sorts of creatures for whom desire and action are simply and basically one and the same. Desire does not lead directly to action in us. It cannot and it should not. Desire leads us into a murky realm of decisions. Core decisions. Crucial decisions. To be human is, in a fundamental way, to make distinctions between that which can and that which cannot be fucked. In a way, Kieślowski made a very darkly humorous move in *Dekalog* 4. It really is audacious and funny all at once. He basically says that the secret thought behind the commandment “honor thy mother and father” is “don’t fuck your parents.” And so, conversely, also “don’t fuck your kids.” There is biological wisdom here, as the materialists never tire in pointing out. We are doing the work of keeping the gene pool healthy in not fucking our own. But we are also doing the important work of salvaging something about love and care that cannot be reduced simply to biology. The social rules around screwing free us up to experience love in a richness that would not be available to us if all love did was to support procreation and child raising. To live in that world would be to live in a kind of biologically determined hell. But we know that there is more to life and to love than the sheer drives of coupling. We know it because we experience it and we experience it because we are forced to make distinctions like that initial clear distinction of making a no-fucking-the-parent/child rule.

And so, to me, *Dekalog* Four is an intense exploration of the way that we learn how powerful and strange love is by facing situations in which feelings of love and desire have become difficult and confusing. In the suffering of love is its truth. In the confrontation of the true weirdness of the world do we find its

divinity. Or so it seems to me. Perhaps you have a different reading of that film....

in friendship and love (but no fucking),

morgan

June 14, 2020, 1:42 PM

Dear Morgan,

Thank you for the kind words and for rising to the challenge of *Dekalog 4*, with all of its nerve-wracking and uncomfortable moments. When we screened that episode for my students, I remember hearing an audible, collective gasp of relief during that moment you mention, when the father character, Michal (Janusz Gajos), covers up the bare skin of his daughter Anka (Adrianna Biedrzyńska), rather than touching her. This breath-taking effect is analogous in some ways to the queasy moments in *Three Colors: Red* when the retired judge, Joseph Kern (Jean-Louis Trintignant) tries to flirt with the young student fashion model Valentine (Irène Jacob), when he is probably older than her own father.

Kieślowski “goes there.” But in both cases he veers away from an exploitative and predatory narrative and towards what a Freudian critic might describe as sublimated libidinal energy between generations that is ultimately transmuted into a more positive channeling of genuine care. This energy is the one that all too often turns into grotesque abuses of power when it is inappropriately sexualized. But that’s a perversion of its potential as a safe space for non-sexual friendships between genders and generations. In fact, I think both of these stories, *Red* and *Dekalog 4*, probably only “work” in their most meaningful ways within a Freudian context, in terms of the influence of the “family romance” narrative in postwar 20th-century cinema.

Kern may or may not be clairvoyant. What a fascinating and disturbing character, friendless, unkempt, and vile, with a look of uncleanness and sick desperation about him, yet with something to offer that only Valentine seems able to discern because of her courage and her honesty in her dealings with him. It’s an open question whether he sees something in advance of the ferry disaster in the English Channel that completes the *Three*

*Colors* trilogy in such a heart-stopping finale — and brings three pairs of lovers together, one from each film in the series. Kern's comments about dreaming of Valentine waking up contentedly next to a lover in a few decades make the viewer recoil at first, if they assume that Kern is talking about himself as that lover. Of course, the more attentive viewer understands immediately that the timeline he's invoking makes that impossible — Kern is trying to tell her that her capacity for love will endure.

In reality, throughout the film, Kern has been acting as a strange sort of fortune-teller matchmaker-witch figure, an idea bolstered by the isolation of his enchanted home, constantly swept by ominous winds and swirls of dead leaves above Lake Geneva, kept company by his familiar, the wonderful (and possibly also psychic?) dog, Rita. But he might easily be mistaken by some viewers for a creepy adoptive father-figure, or an abusive older lover like the manipulative and exploitative puppeteer figure that Jacob encounters, and finally escapes from, in her “rebirth” near the ending of *The Double Life of Veronique*. The point is that Valentine “reads him right” by discarding her fear of Kern, like the ingenuous protagonist who encounters a good witch in a fairy tale, and benefits from their association through visits to the old dark house and its unsettling wonders and portals to the beyond. It's Kern who tells Valentine to take the ferry to England, putting her life in danger. One senses that he's aware of the danger on some level but also that he has “seen” that Valentine will meet that good lover of hers on a risky sea voyage. I sense the tonal range and some of the subject matter (marriages and ocean disasters) of Shakespeare's late romances, with *Red* as his *Tempest* and Kern as his *Prospero*.

Kern spends the film attempting to bring Valentine together with the young lawyer Auguste (Jean-Pierre Lorit) who lives across the street from her as her unknown neighbor in downtown Geneva. If Kern has had a vision of Valentine and Auguste waking up together in the future, it's an open question raised by the film as to whether he suggests that she take the ferry to

London *because* he knows or guesses from his eavesdropping on the phone lines of his neighbors that Auguste will be traveling on the same boat. In fact his matchmaking contains an additional layer of serendipity, since it's Kern's illegal wiretapping court case that breaks up Auguste's previous relationship (his girlfriend meets someone new at Kern's trial), leaving him free to pursue Valentine. Was this intentional or accidental on Kern's part? We're trapped here in the loops regarding free will that accompany all stories of psychic precognition, but, fortunately, we're not given a clear answer.

Maybe Kern even knows about the storm and the disaster at sea that might bring Valentine and Auguste together? Certainly he seems stressed out about the details of her ferry ticket and attempts to confirm her safety in advance by calling up the "personalized weather reports" wrongly predicting sunny weather for the crossing. These reports, in turn, are offered as a toll phone service by Auguste's former girlfriend, who, we discover later, dies in a yacht in the same storm with her new lover. If Kern does have foreknowledge of the storm, this paints him in an extremely dubious moral light as someone who plays with others' lives, like the Old Testament God of Bob Dylan in "Highway 61." But the narrative is elliptical and the overall impression generated is that his precognition is fragmentary, which perhaps helps to explain why he doesn't warn the yacht-goer that her weather report might be wrong and why he doesn't seem to know precisely what will occur on the ferry. All this could help to reframe the entire film in a less unsettling light by "explaining" Kern's interest in Valentine, but this is a matter for individual viewers to decide for themselves, precisely because the viewer must determine what is meant by chance and what is meant by fate in *Red*, and how human decisions factor in to shift the matrix of the universe in ways that are unpredictable (or predestined, as one pleases).

Valentine herself seems totally unphased by Kern's creepy remarks, and maybe there's something cultural or generational



lost in translation here about young women setting aside highly annoying sexual comments from perverted older men as *de rigueur* in its day, I'm not sure. We must believe — or Jacob must make us believe — that she feels intrigued by and relatively safe with Kern in order for the film to function. Her performance is extraordinarily difficult and successful in disguising a sort of basic implausibility that makes the whole narrative tick. She is drawn into Kern's eavesdropping scheme with a *Rear Window*-like mixture of fascination and guilty transgressiveness (a little bit like Grace Kelly in Hitchcock's 1954 film). But Kieślowski, and not for the first time, inverts Hitchcock's basic plan. Kern reacts to Valentine's condemnation of his illegal wiretapping by turning himself in to the authorities. Certainly it's Valentine who's the heroic figure in *Red*, trusting in love and in friendship. But she's nobody's fool and brings Kern up short, changing the trajectory of his life and causing him to confess his crimes.

*Red* contains what I would call the “spiritualist Kieślowski.” This drift grinds its gears against orthodox monotheism in its understanding of the potentially supernatural forces at work in the world that oscillate, as ever in his films, between randomness and destiny (and everything we do not know, but that is implied, by those terms and concepts). Then again, from a cultural perspective, that very blend of folk religion and deep forest witchery, intended in the most positive sense, combined with Catholic superstitiousness, is, itself, probably a common enough incoherence in popular belief in Europe in general and Poland in particular. Georgina Evans, in her essay on *Red*, “A Fraternity of Strangers,” suggests that “there is an invisible but fallible authority presiding over the world within the film.” This comment seems apt and yet it's only one possible reading among many in exploring why, in Evans's words, the film suggests “uncanny resemblances” that are “not just coincidences.” Fallible gods and a host of unexplained, potentially supernatural phenomena, while far from orthodox, are certainly post-secular and feel true to life.

\* \* \*

A long detour away from *Dekalog* 4, my apologies! But I think this, and your reading of the ethical dilemma posed by *Dekalog* 4, takes us right to the heart of the matter. Once again, as in *Dekalog* 2, there is a deliberative avoidance of a silly reading of the Commandments. This superficial reading would be to take *Dekalog* 4 as a reflection on the incest portrayed in the “Old” Testament. The literalist reading of the Bible is also called out here, along with the intellectually vapid and morally repugnant discussions regarding who slept with whom when there was nobody else to sleep with in order to propagate the species, etc. This not-very-interesting stuff is eschewed by Kieślowski in favor of something far more intriguing and profound. And that something is the nature and meaning of human liberation. It’s how *Red* connects its variations on the theme of *Fraternité* to *Blue*’s meditations on *Liberté*, by invoking the colors on the French flag. (This remains true even though *Red* takes place in Switzerland — albeit in Francophone territory.) The universal brotherhood of humanity can be reconciled with freedom only by invoking limits on individualism as the true path towards love.

So I would amplify what you’re saying here by describing true freedom as a series of decisions that constrain us, paradoxically enough, as opposed to a false freedom, based on modern consumer culture, as the ability to do whatever we want whenever we want to. (Which is a phony liberation controlled and limited by selfishness and base desires rather than love and genuine commitments.) In a way, much of Kieślowski’s career was dedicated to the utter demolition of this consumerist notion of freedom. I wonder if that is what makes him a quintessential 20th-century Pole, and a European, as well, finally, in his double skepticism of the American ideal of freedom as well as the Soviet ideal of liberation. We could cast this in more philosophical terms, however, by noting the basic difference between “negative” freedom (freedom “from” limits) and “positive” freedom (freedom “to”

decide to do something positive, even if that adds ties that bind). For me, this is the purest distillation of Kieślowski's worldview as an artist and lies somewhere near the core of both the *Dekalog* and *Three Colors*.

In *Blue*, as I mentioned before, Julie learns not only that love connects us to others by adding obligations that reduce our total lack of constraints, but also that this grown-up idea of love is a form of positive liberation. In your previous etymological exploration of the word "religion" as one that implies a "binding," you dwell in the precise territory of overlap between Kieślowski's ideas on love and on spirituality. This, again, is one "reason" (if I can use such an awkward term for the mysteries of art) why the ending of *Blue*, with its shocking joining up of sexual love, and side-eye glimpses of joyless sexuality juxtaposed from the strip club, combined with a musical rendition of St. Paul's eternal sentences about love, feels so satisfying on a deep level of yearning. This finale is both blasphemous and spiritual — *Song of Songs* deep. Liberation involves love, love involves binding ourselves to others, and to ideals greater than ourselves. Maybe even to things greater than secular ideals, things that are, on some level, spiritual or religious. If this is the case, it may be worth mentioning in passing, Kieślowski is also challenging the meaning of the Tricolor flag in another way, by registering a query about the secular basis of the French State.

This is all by way of concurring entirely with your reading of *Dekalog 4*. Michal and Anka, whether or not they are biologically related (that is put in question, wisely, by the episode through the device of the secret letters about Anka's parentage), are choosing to love one another as family rather than as romantic partners. And this choice diminishes a shallow understanding of freedom while enhancing a stronger bond than sex can provide and which sex would utterly destroy, along with their bond, wrecking both people, and both lives, in the process. Michal and Anka are liberated by their lack of choice, and that's something that you'll never see advertised on commercial

television. Nor would such a drama have ever been broadcast by NBC in the 1980s. The reasons given would appear in the guise of public morality, but in fact this specific form of corporate censorship — harsher in its own way, at least in this very narrow sense, in capitalist America than in communist Poland in 1988 — would be structurally related to this devastating critique of freedom offered in *Dekalog* 4.

\* \* \*

On another line of thought that loops back to our previous discussions and disagreements, I think that it helps to clarify the intentions of *Dekalog* 4 by emphasizing the word “*Dekalog*.” The title of the series — and the lack of individual titles for each episode — emphasize extra-textual elements in ways that frame the story as fiction and pull the viewer out of total immersion in the realism of the story world. We search outside the text or the frame of the story for threads and meanings that attach what we’re viewing to the Hebrew Bible and the Mosaic Code (or its Catholic rendering). It’s an intertextual adventure leading into the thicket of film theory about adaptation. Kiesłowski doesn’t exactly busy himself with breaking the fourth wall, although one might argue that something of that nature is going on with the Artur Barciś character throughout. This is more of a mild gesture towards the frame of the painting that does not interfere very much with the illusion of its realism. It simply indicates that this is a story about stories in addition to being a story.

I don’t want to overemphasize this facet of the *Dekalog*, especially not vis-à-vis *Dekalog* 4. But I do think this matters more to how the viewer takes in *Dekalog* 5. I also see this as a persistent feature of much of Kiesłowski’s work. I think this aligns him in some ways with other postwar postmodernist purveyors of metafiction, although his touch is far lighter and more subtle. In addition, *Dekalog* inevitably invokes the structure and order of narratives like James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) — modern ekphrastic works that “translate” or “update” some classic text to a contem-

porary setting and derive at least some of their meaning from the free play between texts and eras. This facet operates somewhere in the DNA of both *Dekalog* and *Three Colors*, and it is not a trivial part of their meaning in my view. Kieślowski manages this feat without the radical formal disruption involved in high modernism but also without the pretentious gamesmanship and tedious overreliance on metafictional elements in many post-modern works.

These relatively gentle but significant alienation effects allow me, as a viewer, to exist in two places at once. I am simultaneously inside and outside of the frame of the story. I'm allowed to peer into a window and spy on my neighbors in the Warsaw tower block, while, at the same time, I am made aware that I am not and have never been to Poland, do not understand the language, and am being presented with a series of dramas, all of which are a similar length, in a DVD collection of films broadcast on television thirty something years ago, which the filmmakers want me to reflect on in tandem with some Biblical texts.

I mention this, again, not primarily in light of *Dekalog* 4 but rather in advance of discussing *Dekalog* 5 and *A Short Film About Killing*. Can I be honest? I cling with gratitude to these gestures towards self-conscious fictionality that are present in *Dekalog* 5. I don't want to get dragged down into the abyss of this story without these signs pointing to what I have been calling the fictionality of fiction. Maybe this reflects poorly on me. But I'm not sure I could bear to watch this episode over and over again without being reminded by the filmmakers, in small ways, that the events portrayed are not really happening. This fine-grained distinction between watching a theatrical work of fiction and witnessing real events in a documentary make all the difference to me as a viewer of *Dekalog* 5. These distinctions allow me to reflect analytically on what I'm watching rather than merely being pulverized by the sights and sounds of the murder and the execution depicted in the episode. I need this to be what it is — fiction. Not “just a story,” but a story.

By saying this, I don't mean to take away from the heightened atmosphere of realism that haunts the episode, or from the basically Chekhovian timbre that marks the *Dekalog* more generally. But I did want to check in and gauge your own response to *Dekalog* 5 with our most basic critical disagreement about the series in mind. I think the various "visual artifacts" on the filtered image in this episode, and its other formal and intertextual elements, distort the picture in ways that make any easy consumption of the story more difficult. In this regard, I see Kieślowski's films existing in continuity with the broader modernist inheritance of 20th-century visual art (in *Dekalog* 5, Expressionism in particular), even while the filmmaker yearns to move beyond the closed loops of postmodern metafictional games. And you?

Notes from your friend JMT

*P.S. Now seemed like a fitting time to attach this image. It's the statue in Washington, DC, just across from the White House, dedicated to the Polish hero of the American Revolutionary War, and the architect of West Point, Tadeusz Kościuszko (1746–1817), as annotated by graffiti during the BLM protests, and seen through the metal fencing of the buffer zone created between the marchers and the Presidential residency. Imagine your faithful correspondent, peering through the barrier.*



June 17, 2020, 11:42 AM

Dear Josh,

Well, my friend, I do think we're gonna have to wrangle a bit more about this whole reality/fiction divide you keep reintroducing.

I completely disagree with you that *Dekalog 5* works because we know it to be a work of fiction. Completely disagree. *Dekalog 5* works, to me, because it is so powerful an experience that we simply don't care whether it is fiction or not, the distinction becomes meaningless. We realize that we've been shown something profound about what it means to murder someone, whether the state does it or whether an individual does it. We feel shame in the face of our own relationship to murder, our own complicity with the killing of other humans. Watching that film shakes you. It shook me. It didn't shake me because I had distance from it, but because it collapsed all the distance I wanted to try to get from it. (The various filters of the film, to me, heighten the power and immediacy, since it is quite often the case that the most traumatic things we experience are experienced in a kind of fog). I want to run away from that film and I can't. I will never forget, for example, the look on the lawyer's face when he goes to visit the condemned young man in prison and his utter helplessness as he watches the horrifying execution unfold. Those are the images in the film that make it unforgettable. The human conversations in the film, the story that the condemned kid tells about his sister being killed, those are what are burned into your brain once you've seen the film.

To watch *Dekalog 5* and then to be told that people in Poland watched the film and then wanted to abolish the death penalty is to believe such a thing possible (whether or not the film actually influenced the Polish moratorium on state killings). It is to believe that the otherwise impossible is completely plausible. I can't, off the top of my head, think of another film like that. The

point is that the film demands something of us. You can't just watch it and go on with your life. I mean, you can, of course. But you can't. It is a film that reaches into your soul and seriously fucks with it. Why does it do that? How does it do that? I don't know and in a sense I don't care to know. Because I think the desire to "figure out" how the film manages to rearrange one's soul, to see the film as a "film," is really the desire, in the face of fear, to mute that power, to gain some distance from it and to get out from under its thumb. I think one million film students could remake that film shot for shot and none of those films would match the power of the original for the reason that the courage and the audacity and the humanity of the film would not be there in the same way those things are there to be seen on the screen, digital or analog or however it is presented, every time that Kieślowski's film is shown. Why is that? Totally mysterious. Unexplainable. But I have no doubt that this is true.

The proviso that this is "fiction" and we get some distance from the experience by knowing that it is "fiction" and that this is different from "reality" smacks, to me, of wanting something to be so and of simply positing a hard ontological divide where one does not exist. Some of the aspects of "fiction" that you claim differentiate it from "reality" are, I would say, just as much features of that so-called reality. Being inside and outside of an experience at the same time. This happens to me walking down the hallway going to the bathroom. All of a sudden, I'll be struck by myself observing myself as I walk, or whatever. By the same token, I have noticed thousands of times that the way I actually behave, things I say, ways I hold myself, attitudes I actually take toward others, these have all been lifted wholesale from novels I've read, movies I've seen, etc. My life is every bit as much a "fiction" as a book by Victor Hugo or a movie by Alice Rohrwacher.

What I am trying to say is that everything is real. Everything is Real. This is maybe a flip on the typical accusation against po-mo thought, the accusation that postmodernism claims everything is a construct, everything a text, etc. In a sense, yes.



But flip that around. The more interesting thought is that every object in the universe, a dream, a mailbox, a neutron, a song, a wombat, a quasar, a pain in the leg, stone, a movie, they are all Real. The killings that happen in *Dekalog 5* are fundamentally important. We who have been a part of those killings, we who have faced those killings, we have been changed forever by those killings. Living through those killings is as inextricably a part of my life as are the first time I kissed another person on the lips, or held the hand of a loved person for the very last time, or any number of singular and powerful events that have changed me in the course of my life.

What is the point of any of this, what is the point of watching any film at all or engaging with any piece of art unless we are brought, somehow, to a deeper engagement with the world, with ourselves, with God in doing so? Thus the seeming paradox between the highest commandment being to love God and the simultaneous injunction that we love our neighbor. It isn't actually a paradox at all. To love God, truly, to get what that means is to realize that one must love one's neighbor. Theory and praxis are collapsed here. They are just two different versions of the same thing. It isn't that one thing, God, is Object A over there and the other thing, Object B, is the neighbor and therefore there could be some inherent conflict between loving the one and loving the other. It's that a true understanding of God is seeing that God is the truth and beauty of the neighbor who therefore must be loved. The two just flow right into one another. It is kind of the same thing in watching a truly true and beautiful movie. Watching a film like *Dekalog* is not some separate thing that I can choose to apply to reality or not. It already *is* reality. Watching the movie has already served to reshape and recreate what reality is. That's why it matters. I'm not quite the same person after watching *Dekalog*, if I've really watched it. I've been converted. My soul has been affected. And one clear thing is that after watching *Dekalog 5* I have deeper access, because it is not intellectual access, but what I'm going to call soul-access, experiential access. I now have this deeply and profoundly expe-

rienced sense that the act of killing, in whatever cause, is simply horrifying. That truth is now like a wound on my soul. I'm not going to be able to uproot that wound in the same way that I can talk myself out of an argument. Because the wound hurts and it burns and it has a reality (there's that word again).

So, Kieślowski has done an incredible thing here. He has taken a potentially empty formula, thou shalt not kill, and he has turned it into a form of experience that literally changes your life. If that's not God's work, I don't know what is. Here, in the film *Dekalog 5*, is a real experience of killing. What will you do now?

with love,

morgan

June 18, 2020, 3:34 PM

Dear Morgan,

This is a productive disagreement that illuminates the work of art we are exploring together from different sides, and I'd like to think that we are like two mountaineers attempting to summit the same peak from different trails. I appreciate your notes on cinema's unusual medium-specific ability to reach into our lived experience and to become as real a part of our lives as many other memories. Too true. Certain novels might have a similar effect, but great movies do something to our wiring that is probably unique. Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1869) probably has an analogous place in literature, and, in fact, a somewhat similar core idea to the *Dekalog*, as an "updated" Biblical story set amidst contemporary life. But obviously there are things *The Idiot* does that aren't possible on television, and vice versa. I think the *Dekalog* is worthy of that company.

And, yes, like *The Idiot*, the *Dekalog* is a work of fiction. Acknowledging its fictionality does not reduce its power, in my view. Starting from this fact, one attempts to reckon with how it operates, not only in terms of cinematography, acting, script, lighting, a lunch for the production cast and crew, and so forth, but also as it relates to something far less mechanical and far more mysterious. In this irreducible aspect — the one I suspect we are both attempting to describe in our own ways — resides something important and basic about the nature of art. Yours is the mystical path and mine is the analytical one, it would seem, at the moment. (Maybe, later, I could attempt to reconcile those two paths through a discussion of the Buddhist concepts of emptiness and Buddha-nature, but let's stick with Kieślowski for now and not risk confusing the issue or getting sidetracked in things not directly related to the series.)

I imagine I must be worried that your approach obscures some of the operational facets of the work of art while you're anx-

ious to protect the mystery around things which cannot be known—why we make art, or why we worship divinities, or bury our dead, or wonder about chance and fate, or create constellations and stories about the stars, rather than not doing these things. You be you. Our viewpoints might not be reconcilable. That's okay. Interesting, even.

For me, the powers of horror in these films that link art with abjection and catharsis (to use Kristeva's terminology from our previous conversation about von Trier), rely on their status as fiction and performance. In the extended scene of the execution from *Dekalog 5*, as it is presented with slight variations in *A Short Film About Killing*, the condemned man, Jacek (Mirosław Baka), defecates as he's being hung. Including this element of horror in the film version is a faithful act of realism, as witnessed by the lawyer-character, Piotr (Krzysztof Globisz), that not only permits the audience access to things rarely screened but also conveys the truth of what happens during a real hanging. This speaks to the power of the fiction....

And if this is true of the execution scene, it is also true of Jacek's murder of the cabbie (played by Jan Tesarz). In fact, it is only because of the application of a ruthless and rigorous realism in the fictional story, contrasted with the artifice of the cinematography, that the murder is portrayed as it is, horribly slow, messy, brutal, and devoid of any of the "virtues" that the cinema has ever lent to violence. In particular, it's the elongation of the scene that allows the viewer to recognize the truth about how difficult and horrifying it would be to kill someone.

*Dekalog 5* and *A Short Film About Killing* allow us to recognize that all of the cinematic violence we've been watching for our entire lives in mainstream commercial Hollywood films is fake and probably has a pernicious effect on its audience. But this doesn't make Kieślowski's films non-fiction, of course. In fact, Kieślowski made a lot of documentaries early on in his career, and then abandoned the form altogether, in part because of

his recognition that the truths he wanted to uncover needed to be told in fictional stories, and in part because he intuited that documentaries were not free from fictionalized elements that made real people into performers, in specific ways that made Kieślowski uncomfortable with the ethics of documentary filmmaking. This shift in his work mattered to Kieślowski.

Acknowledging a work of fiction as fiction does not diminish its power or downgrade its status as a vessel for truth-telling, for me. Our feelings about it are real, of course. And the film itself is real, I agree! I very much like your idea about the real existence of the film as something that is not separate from the rest of the world. Once seen, we carry *Dekalog 5* or *A Short Film About Killing* with us for life. They cannot be unseen. We might not ever see the world the same way again. Certainly this should be true for any hypothetical proponent of the death penalty who watches them, especially a Christian (or “Christian”) promoter of State executions, or really any proponent of just (or “just”) violence. These films also have the power to alter our basic conceptions of what the cinema is, or, rather, what it is *for*.

Your reaction to the episode shows your large-hearted capacity to feel what the artist wishes you to feel as a result of encountering their fiction. I feel it, too. I feel a strong sense of humility—almost awe, in this case—in the presence of a work of fiction with these powers. But I appreciate the episode/film all the more, not less so, for its categorical status as fiction, and for Kieślowski’s deliberative decision to create fiction and not documentary. This fact about the work of art doesn’t leave me cold, although it does leave room for analytical distance. This distance, again, is not bad or good, it’s simply an expression of the spatial arrangement of the cinemagoer sitting there in relative safety, absorbing fictional events on a two-dimensional screen, and thinking about what they’ve seen.

One curious intertextual sidebar here involves Kieślowski’s surprisingly strong interest in the films of Hitchcock, especially in

*Dekalog 5/6* and *A Short Film About Killing/Love*. Mark Cousins demonstrates a connection between *5/Killing* and *Psycho* (1960) in his section on Kieślowski in *The Story of Film*. There's a visual rhyme apparent, when the cabbie stops his car to allow some children to cross the street, with the scene in *Psycho* when Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) stops her car and exchanges glances with her boss as she's leaving Phoenix after stealing the money from work. Cousins goes on to suggest that the sensationalized (and sexualized) frenzy of violence in *Psycho*'s shower scene is deliberately undone by Kieślowski's murder scene, with its truthful lack of speed and absolute denial of audience titillation. Amplifying on Cousins's remarks, one might also suggest that the Fifth Commandment is being directed here against genre filmmaking. Thou shalt not kill — even in the movies — unless that fictional killing shows the audience what real killing is “about.”

A similar set of rhyming scenes seems to occur between *Dekalog 6/A Short Film About Love* and Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. It's not simply that there's a peeping tom character (Tomek, played by Olaf Lubaszenko) possessed of an unhealthy obsession with spying on his neighbors, and one neighbor in particular, Magda (Grażyna Szapołowska). It's also that Tomek pieces together a “story” about Magda based on watching what amounts to a “silent film” (albeit one seen through a telescope) about her life. What's more, both films turn the tables on the voyeur by having the watched become the watcher (and vice versa) at a key moment when the spying is called out and these parallel lives begin to mix. That startling moment in film history when Lars Thorwald (Raymond Burr) trains his gaze on L.B. Jefferies (Jimmy Stewart) — and, according to the editing plan of the film, on us as a moviegoing voyeurs — is echoed when Magda confronts Tomek's gaze.

Here again, Kieślowski seems intent on inverting and subverting Hitchcock's tendencies towards melodrama and his addiction to genre fiction. In *Rear Window*, the trajectory of the story hurtles toward the solution to a mystery — Jeffries and Lisa Carol

Fremont (Grace Kelly) solve the murder case unfolding across the way. Their voyeurism is validated, in some sense, by the outcome of the film, which ends with the mystery solved and the couple together. *Dekalog 6* and *A Short Film About Love* proceed in just the opposite direction, with Magda visiting Tomek after he has attempted to kill himself out of shame. If I recall correctly, the film version differs from the series in offering narrative prolepsis and a circular story, beginning with Magda attempting to touch Tomek's bandaged wrist, then returning to that moment of physical proximity near the ending.

Either way, the male gaze represented by Tomek — the one that dominates film history in general and Hitchcock's movies in particular — has taken a big hit at the hands of Kiesłowski. In her classic 1975 essay on this subject, Laura Mulvey describes how we're often watching men watch women in movies. We're said to experience a double pleasure of sexualizing the women onscreen and identifying with the quest of the male protagonist in their own romantic and/or sexual pursuit of those same alluring women. Kiesłowski turns both of these assumptions of classical cinema on their head, inducing in the viewer deep discomfort while watching Tomek watching Magda, and challenging the voyeuristic observation of her sexual encounters by revealing that she knows she's being watched. All of this culminates in Magda's sexual humiliation of Tomek when he finally gains access to her apartment, when she causes him to ejaculate prematurely in a way that utterly destroys the oppressive structure of male romantic desire. But nothing is ever simple with Kiesłowski. It isn't just that his film punishes what Hitchcock's film rewards. It's that the audience unlearns an entire way of seeing — vision as domination and control — at the base of "visual pleasure" in commercial cinema (if not modern male sexuality itself). Tomek perhaps might be consoled with Magda's contact in the final analysis, but given his attempted suicide it cannot really be said that he is rewarded for this painful insight.

Hitchcock confessed the limits of his filmmaking bag of tricks to François Truffaut in the 1962 conversations that became the book *Hitchcock/Truffaut* (1966). Hitchcock worried that his films were too limited by their reliance on popular genre conventions and he regretted that he had not experimented more. That might have been nothing more than a polite generational tip of the hat to what the French New Wave already had been able to accomplish in terms of its range of form and content by the early 1960s. But this remark also speaks indirectly to the manner in which many later filmmakers have productively confronted Hitchcock's legacy regarding gender and sexuality in a mixed manner of homage and deep criticism, from Antonioni in *Blow-Up* (1966) to Truffaut in *The Bride Wore Black* (1968), Brian DePalma in *Sisters* (1972), Kieślowski in *Dekalog 5/6, A Short Film About Killing/Love*, and *Red*, Almodóvar in *All About My Mother* (1999), and Lynne Ramsay in *Morvern Callar* (2002) and *You Were Never Really Here* (2018), to name only a few examples from each decade.

Antonioni and Kieślowski seem linked in their critiques of classic cinema and the whole notion of what a “mystery” entails. Antonioni scholar Frank Tomasulo employs a useful term, “epistemological quests,” for the filmmaker's modernist manner of overturning Hitchcock's insistence on tying up loose ends, ensuring that the audience is never confused about the solution of the crime, and using the detective genre as a mode of storytelling that bolsters the audience's impression of a rationally constructed universe that can be detected by the detective figure in the story and the viewer of the film. (*Vertigo* [1958] is an interesting counterexample, one might argue; one which clearly influenced *The Double Life of Veronique*.) Instead, Antonioni highlights those things which cannot be known. He presents elliptical narratives in which important explanations for events are removed from view, and, more generally, represents human nature as a puzzle without any solution.



Kieślowski's filmmaking methods are less modernist or experimental than Antonioni's, and he tends to proceed in a far less aggressively radical storytelling mode, but I think he favors this idea of an epistemological quest. Here, the real mystery veers away from plotting and dwells in the characters, the investigations of which never really conclude and do not reach any stable ground of comfortable knowing. We end *Dekalog 6* and *A Short Film About Love* without feeling that we know what's in store for these characters or even why, precisely, they acted as they did. Maybe they themselves don't know, either. If *A Short Film About Love* is, in fact, a short film about love, then are we left feeling that we know what love is or means? We've explored some of what it means to Tomek and Magda, and, in the process, learned of love's existence, power, and basic necessity to the desire to keep on living. This is a lot already, and very far from nothing. But if we feel that we still don't know what love is, exactly, that also speaks to the effectiveness of the film or the episode. We have continued a process at work throughout the series, one of unknowing a number of things we might have thought we knew, in this case about love.

There's yet another interesting intertextual tension underlying *Dekalog 6* and *A Short Film About Love* that you might be moved to explore further. In the Catholic rendition of the Decalogue, it's adultery that is in question here, of course, but in the Hebrew Bible, the Sixth Commandment is the one we've been discussing so far as number five, "Thou shalt not kill." Tomek's attempted suicide takes on a double meaning, then, insofar as it might exist in the interstitial area between these two Commandments, no? This brings up another subject that might be worth your time and consideration. There's a general critical consensus that, just as the Ten Commandments are not considered separable, the *Dekalog* is not limited to exploring one Commandment at a time. But, assuming that you agree with this drift, how do you see that more holistic approach operating within the framework of the series, both in terms of individual episodes and the whole collection of these stories? Is the word "Commandment" itself

unhelpful at times or potentially confusing to the person attempting to live by these directives? Or I am asking the wrong questions here about these two critical episodes and the expanded films that exist in parallel with them?

Notes from your friend JMT

June 23, 2020, 3:10 AM

Dear Josh,

Productive disagreement! Yes, indeed. And please know that I'm not insinuating that you have a "cold" approach to watching films or confronting art. You are many things. You are not cold.

I would like to talk about fiction just a little bit more and then add a thing or two about *Dekalog* 6. As a rough and ready taxonomy of stuff in the world I would say that it makes perfect sense to talk about fictions and non-fictions. Obviously, the way that characters "exist" in a book is different from the way that you and I exist right now. Still, at a certain point it gets fuzzy, since the very word "fiction" goes back to the Latin verb *figere*, which simply means "to form" or "to shape." We can understand how a work of art is something formed or shaped, literally or figuratively, in the act of making it. This kind of object could then be said to have a different ontological status than the stuff that is, let's say, given to us without such deliberate forming or shaping. A tree, for instance, is a non-fiction while a novel is a fiction. But I hope you can see that the division already seems a little bit shaky here. Isn't the tree formed and shaped as well, by Nature, DNA, God, whatever?

Do you see the point here? What I'm trying to dispute is that calling something a fiction or a non-fiction gives us a handle on whether one thing is more real than another thing. I'm resisting the pull to create levels of reality. I want to avoid saying that reality is one thing (and what is that, exactly?) and fictions, books, movies, etc., are then secondary reflections or byproducts of that primary reality. You said you were attracted to the idea that a movie is a real thing in the world. Great. But a corollary is that we must abandon the claim that the stuff that happens in a film didn't "really happen" and the stuff that happens to you in "real life" (but again, what is that?) really did. Again, all of it is real. So, I'm suggesting that we put away the ranking of reality

and that we put away the idea that a fiction is “less real” than anything else.

What fiction is, though, and here we can probably find some common ground, is different from other stuff that is not fiction. The real object that is a movie kills people in a different way than, I don't know, an electric chair kills people. You are, in a sense, allowed to kill people in a movie. The way that people die in a movie operates and functions with its own set of rules. I don't personally want to say that deaths of persons in movies are less important than deaths of people in other ways, and I don't want to say they are less real or didn't “really” happen. Again, we've flattened the ontology when we've said that everything is real and that movies are real objects in the world. So, we can't say that one set of deaths is more real than the other. Also, it is worth pointing out that killing and death are just as prevalent in movies as anywhere else. And we have just as much choice in confronting, witnessing, observing, and being around killing and death in day to day life as we do in movie life. The sense of some detachment, some reflective distance, and even some potential cathartic pleasure that we can get in being part of death and killing when it comes to movies is, I'll agree with you, part of the structure of what makes fiction an interesting part of the world and an arena that has its own special set of rules, effects, experiences, whatever. I just want to resist calling that somehow “less real.”

And I also therefore don't want to say that movies are only interesting insofar as we can relate the lessons or the ideas or the experiences in movies back to “real life.” Again, watching a movie is, in itself, an experience of real life. It doesn't need to be related back to anything else. It is already what it is. That's why I like your idea also that *Dekalog 5* is very much, maybe even centrally about killing in other movies, or about the problem of killing when it happens in movies. I'm not saying, by the way (I'm not completely crazy!) that watching a movie about killing doesn't affect us in all sorts of ways that relate to other aspects of life.

But the most powerful aspect of *Dekalog* 5 might be the degree to which it establishes quite powerfully that killing and murder in movies is, indeed, a real thing. *Dekalog* 5 takes a dim view of movies that try to have it both ways (using killing to give us a thrill but ultimately only a cheap thrill, as you describe so well in your last letter). The drawn out, excruciating murder of the taxi cab driver becomes an explication of what it would mean to take seriously the idea of killing someone in a movie. I don't know if it causes us to take life more seriously. But it sure as hell forces us to take movies more seriously.

Thinking this out a bit, I'm suddenly pleased with the idea that the whole of *Dekalog* can be seen as an arena where the Ten Commandments are seen as actually governing the kind of mini-world that a film can create. What if the question hovering over *Dekalog* as a whole is not so much "how can movies illustrate or explicate the Ten Commandments?" but rather "what effect do the Ten Commandments have on a movie?" What happens when you inject the Ten Commandments into the filmic reality of a few apartment blocks in Poland in the late 1980s? The effect is that the various Commandments change the films. They give the films a particular flavor, a set of problems, a moral dilemma, whatever it is in each particular film. Again, it is not that the film is tackling the Commandment, it's that the Commandment is bumping into the film and transforming it as it does. Somehow this thought is very pleasing and revelatory to me as I write it down. I suppose this is partly because, as we both agree, looking at *Dekalog* as a series of explications of each of the Commandments just seems dumb and not at all what Kieślowski was doing.

Anyway, if we go along with this way of thinking for just a minute more then we come to *Dekalog* 6, which is a pretty great example of a film that tries to deny the very premise that watching a film is just some passive process of watching. There is really no such thing as "just watching." The watcher of a film, just like the voyeur in *Dekalog* 6, is always being affected, determined,

changed by the thing being watched, whatever it is. Since all things are real, including films, being affected by a film is just as much a real encounter as being, I don't know, hit by a bus, though the one is generally more physically injurious than the other. There is no safe place to "just watch." And the kid in *Dekalog 6* actually knows this, which is an interesting turn around. He's actually more willing to be hurt, to be wounded, to be affected by other people than the woman that he initially treats as someone simply to be watched as an object of desire. And it is his honest and naive desire to watch as a way to be transformed and to be in genuine contact with something other than himself that awakens the woman too. So, this is a film about the fact that films are not to be watched. Film, in short, is experience.

How's that?!? morgan

June 24, 2020, 12:28 PM

Dear Morgan,

Your insights unlock the episode really well for me. As I mentioned awhile back, the critic Roy Armes published a paperback in 1974 called *Film and Reality*. In this book, Armes argued for a threefold distinction regarding the cinema's connection with reality. First, there's a relationship between film and life that also applies to realistic fiction films. Second, there's a component of genre filmmaking that speaks to the way in which narrative structure and deep storytelling captures larger patterns of life and culturally specific markers at the time these films are made, and that feel to their contemporary audiences real and truthful (or not, as the case may be). And then, third, and perhaps most interesting of all, there's an element to experimental, surreal, or formally disruptive films that causes us to question what reality is, what it means, or what it might be, and how our perceptions and notions about reality might be open to question.

What's remarkable about the *Dekalog* is that it accomplishes all three of these things simultaneously. Kiesłowski presents us with ultra-realist images, like his unfakeable bee crawling out of the jam jar, then supercharges the dramas of his series by weaving the Commandments into the cultural fabric of its storytelling, and, finally, causes us to experience wonder and horror about the possibilities that uncanny, divine, or mysterious forces might be at work in the ordinary world. Isn't the cab driver from *Dekalog* 3, Janusz, also the figure who narrowly escapes death at the hands of Jacek in *Dekalog* 5, because of something we could either label as chance or fate, with all that the latter term implies for religious believers? You know, I think the colors in *Three Colors* operate in a similar fashion, exploring all three levels of cinematic "reality" limned by Armes. While there are many things in the world that are really blue in a way that a camera can record, the steady accretion of blue colors throughout the film *Blue* indicates both that the story relates to the larger collective

narrative of equality implied by the symbolism of French flag *and* that the arrangement of all these blue things in Julie's universe may not be entirely random after all. Something or other might be guiding the whole symphony of blues — and human lives. The world might have different rules than we thought.

So, yes, the Commandments seem to be operating on multiple levels in the *Dekalog*. They help to bring us deeper into the psychological realism of the fictional world by raising impossible ethical paradoxes for the characters. At the same time, they cause each story to resonate beyond its individual characters into larger patterns of the collective unconscious of Warsaw in the late 1980s. And, in addition to all of that, they hint at things which exceed the conventional limits of the secular world as it was defined by the official ideology of the Polish State, in which its residents clearly have lost their faith. This overall effect also may well be medium-specific to film and television insofar as Kieślowski touches on the basic ambiguities or aporias of film's seemingly obvious relationship to reality, which is in fact incredibly problematic, and the medium's inevitable fictionalizations, which are endemic and inseparable from cinema as an art form. As you seem to be implying, correctly in my view, fiction and nonfiction are more deeply intertwined than many would like to imagine. Indeed.

Sidebar: It also might be worth noting that the real antidotes to the oppressive "war on truth" at issue in our own era are not only, as we are constantly told, more facts, better fact-checked facts, and so on, but also must involve better stories, better told stories, and stories that are better than the ones provided to us by liberal newspapers, reactionary pulpits, and the entertainment thrill-rides of the culture industry, most of which merely promote and reproduce capitalist subjectivity in various forms and promote a set of dubious individualistic and selfish if not hateful and abusive or exploitative values shared by these supposedly conflicting political camps.



The *Dekalog* pushes us to ask ourselves what stories we live by, and how the stories we tell ourselves make life matter more, not less, if they are working well and if they are good stories. The Commandments, the symbolic colors of the French flag, the stories of Jesus, and the Buddha, etc., can be twisted into bad stories or they can be expanded into good stories, one might suggest at the risk of stating the obvious. These good stories provide something akin to what the poet Wallace Stevens called “the idea of order.” They save us from the fake freedom of not having a story and potentially liberate us in providing points of contact with narratives that can help to guide us when we’re lost. For the European West, the Commandments provide the ultimate in religious storytelling while the French flag offers the ideal of secular iconography. I’m sure I’m not the first person to notice this intriguing fact about the larger trajectory of Kieślowski’s career arc from the 1980s and 1990s as he moved from one place to the other and offered communist Poland a deep-dive into religious storytelling while presenting liberal France with a fundamental challenge to the story of a secular state. And all without the heavy breathing of clumsy politicking in his art.

Your reading of Tomek’s larger role in the series as a stand-in for the audience feels fitting, albeit in the most intriguing and problematic way, since that idea puts the viewer in the position of the sick puppy who is nevertheless capable of giving and awakening (I like your word here) love. I agree that, as you put it, there’s no such thing as just watching the *Dekalog*. I would add that the Artur Barciś character’s silent witnessing throughout the entire series puts a similar question in a slightly different, more cosmic light, casting the emissary of the divine as a moviegoing observer who is also a minor character in the film of life. On the operational or logistical level, these characters allow Kieślowski to pursue realism and metafiction at the same time, which allows alienation effects and psychological insight to occur simultaneously, as in Bergman and Tarkovsky. On a more philosophical level, this means that we must reflect on what it means to be involved in a story and to consider what makes for a good story or

a bad story. In some ways I really do think it is as blunt a choice as that, even if my words here are very clumsy.

And then there's this thought — a deeply conservative, nagging, troublesome thought — that keeps recurring as I watch these stories. The potential in Christianity for good stories does not always involve good outcomes, at least, not down here, not now, not yet. Christian compassion, when its most basic truths are unlocked, is unusually attuned to suffering, misery, and the lives of marginalized people, of course. One good story of Christ involves a tragic noble failure and one good story of Jesus's followers is that of a grieving band of outcasts and nutters (all of us, in other words) trying to pick up the pieces after the death and disappearance of Jesus. I realize that the Biblical story unfolds beyond this point in some interesting ways, but I'm not sure I accept them. For me, at present, this is where the story ends. I'm not so sure the afterlife, in any form, is a good story. I don't know.

I do know that I'm glad not to see Tomek and Magda tying the knot or entering Heaven together at the end of the episode, because those aren't good stories. The bad stories of Christianity, liberal capitalism, and Soviet Bloc communism are not totally dissimilar insofar as they project a modern human progression towards happiness that is supposedly attainable (and which it is your fault for not attaining — suffering is due to sin). Whether that's some easily obtainable afterlife arranged by certified membership in an organization that operates more like a multilevel marketing scam, or through some ultimate secular form of medical life-extension (a kind of Viagra for hard time), or by means of a revolutionary change in society whereby wealth is equitably distributed and the Central Committee lives on perpetually, etc. No, everything breaks and fails. Good people don't always win. One might wind up forsaken on a cross for doing the right thing, bleeding and crying out and getting the answer of silence.

In direct contrast, the good stories contained within Christianity tell the most uncomfortable truths imaginable about how false and harmful these happiness-narratives can be. In particular, Christianity calls out to those in pain and acknowledges that their pain might not be surmountable in this life, or a problem to be solved, wished away, or vanished through the application of mindfulness seminars, or pills. We go into the darkness by acknowledging that misery and tragedy cannot be avoided indefinitely, but instead need to be passed through, and may never go away. It's part of the risk and danger of Christianity's most honest stories to consider whether pain might be necessary, and, most disturbing of all, that pain might finish us off before we triumph over it. (Buddhism often views pain as a problem to be solved, and, at its most superficial, offers a bad story about pain as little more than a trick of the mind, but I think it, too, has a good story to tell in describing its first Noble Truth as suffering, full stop.)

Through their shared capacity to love, Tomek and Magda discover that freedom and liberation are not the same thing as love, and that pain, not happiness, is often the cost of loving someone. This is so serious that it almost results in suicide for Tomek, and the consolation that Magda tries to provide him and his bandaged arms (which in turn hide opened veins) offers no guarantee or even any real likelihood of future happiness. Nevertheless we must try to love. Not only do we have no choice in the matter, not really, but also we cannot attempt to become human without loving. The idea that loving is losing and that lovers are losers (and vice versa) is fundamental to the Mary Magdalene story, which, in a disappointing lapse, *Dekalog 6* and *A Short Film About Love* reference in an unnecessarily obvious and clunky way through Magda's name and her open sexual proclivities. This draws on an annoying accretion of mythology to which it's easy to object, and which Kieślowski does well to subvert, in large measure, but which lies deeply rooted in European culture, from St. Luke's "sinful woman" washing Christ's feet to Hitchcock's Madeleine (another name for Magdalene) in *Vertigo*. The

nobility of these characters is complex in the extreme — and refreshingly impolite, if inevitably problematic.

On a deeper level, however, this seemingly eternal chain of love and suffering, of love that binds more than it frees, feels true to human life on some fundamental level. It's a good story and makes for good stories in which goodness is not rewarded and in which tragedy, in one form or another, is a train wreck for which all of us are ultimately headed down tracks that might have switches here and there but which guide our path with iron probability. As *The Onion* headline has it, the "Death Rate Remains Stable at 100%." I hope that is not the case for me or for you (or anyone, really) but I know that it is, and that it must be. That is the awful thought that seems to be inescapable even as I thrash around attempting to resist or deny it, and which in fact I find I cannot accept fully. I accept it in fiction, however, because it makes for good stories. This, however, is not the kind of story that dominates commercial fiction or filmmaking in the culture industry. Or in the spiritual industrial complex, for that matter, with its tempting promises of contentment.

How delicate, precise, and closely woven is the pattern that holds the *Dekalog* together? In attempting to describe *Dekalog* 6 and *A Short Film About Love* here in these paragraphs, it dawns on me that I'm also describing much of the inner logic and narrative trajectory — towards specific forms of misery induced by botched love, between lovers as well as parents and children — that haunts the bleak picture of *Dekalog* 7. Would you agree with this drift into what I take to be the interstitial material of the *Dekalog* — the threads that invisibly sew together the separate fabric pieces of these episodes?

Notes from your friend JMT

*P.S. Some blasphemous (and, I think, incisive) street art here that I recorded a few years ago in Germany. It touches indirectly on*

*some of the points raised above about the problematic elements of the Magda/Magdalene/Madeleine mythology....*



June 25, 2020, 10:53 AM

Dear Josh,

I'm not gonna beat a dead horse too much here, but the problem with talking about film's "relationship to reality" as you put it in mentioning Armes's book is that it still assumes reality is something "out there," which film, or people for that matter, then have to figure out how they relate to. All the intractable problems of modern epistemology sort of spiral out from there. I'm suggesting getting rid of all that altogether. I'm not even sure how committed I was to this idea when we first started our exchange, but I'm talking myself into it more and more every day. Films are simply part of and partially constitutive of reality and vice versa. Done. No levels. No access problems. No primary and secondary reality. Just one big wonderful weirdness out there in constant contact with itself in every conceivable way. You claim, for instance, that I'm saying "fiction and nonfiction are more deeply intertwined than many would like to imagine." Yes. But even more so. I'm saying that fiction and nonfiction are completely and totally intertwined in that they are both equally "reality." That's not to say that there aren't interesting and important differences between how fiction works and how nonfiction works. But one is not more "reality" than the other. I'm trying to completely flatten the ontology here. But maybe that is enough of that for now.

Definitely love your idea about the real question being one of good and bad stories, or about how well we tell our stories. I have been thinking similar thoughts. And yes, of course, a hearty yes to your description of the problem Christianity faces in telling its story. To me, you are simply describing what it means truly to be a Christian (or, in the case of Buddhism, a Buddhist of the primacy of the 1st Noble Truth). I'm a Christian of the Cross, if I can put it that way, a Christian of the empty tomb. I'm deeply ambivalent about the Resurrection story. Fine as a metaphor, sure. But I get very nervous with all this talk of

conquering death. Death, to me, is fundamental. Real death. Not fake death, not going to sleep and waking up again just as you are but somehow infinitely and in heaven. No. This is silly. This is vampirism. There is some sense in which the dead are still with us, in which one must take very seriously the real presence of death, the dead, the ancestors. But this is another matter. The core problem of death does not go away for Christians and should not go away. The Resurrection does not solve it. In my most heretical moments I would like to imagine what a Christianity without the resurrection would look like. No insipid consolation. Nothing. Just the hard ass Cross standing bleak as a motherfucker on the hill of Golgotha and the realization that love must be lived through to the very end. The point is that even in the shadow of Golgotha it is still worth it, love and all its wrenching vulnerabilities is still the only way. Collapse into the Cross and live and love and die, all ye who suffer. It is still worth it. It is still the only way. That's what He showed us, say I. And that is why I break bread at His table.

*Dekalog* is, to me, very much a document of this kind of Christianity. How that stands with orthodoxy I am not sure. But what is orthodoxy without heresy? The point is that both things are within the faith. It takes being within the faith to be a proper heretic.

To be a proper heretic means to propose, as you say in different words, that love is both a solution and a terrible problem at the same time. It is a "solution" that only ever throws one outside oneself and into one catastrophe after another. Since God is love, and love is a problem, it would follow that God is a problem, that God must always partly be understood in the guise of the trickster, the satan. More heresy on my part, but, you know, the thought is unavoidable. Along these lines I think it is interesting what you say about *Dekalog* 7. As you put it, *Dekalog* 7 is an exploration of the "specific forms of misery induced by botched love." Yeah. Or maybe not even botched love. Maybe

sometimes love simply sets up antinomies that are too much for any single person to resolve, or any family to resolve. One must bear witness to these stories too. One must face the situations where love gets so warped and tangled in upon itself that it is unbearable. I think you are onto something that *Dekalog 7* is basically an exploration of this situation.

The problem, though, is that of all the *Dekalog* films I find this one to be the least successful. I don't think we can brush this aside. Somehow, it just doesn't work. And I'm still not really sure why. It seems to have all the elements that make the other *Dekalog* films so amazing. In theory, it should be great. But it just plods and drags in a bad way. Somehow it looks and feels like an after school special much of the time. Is there a problem with the lighting? Do little technical matters break the spell? I truly don't know. I suspect the script needed more work. Somehow, it is too talky. I mean, the other *Dekalog* films are talky. But this one has that kind of talking that feels like it is explaining the plot and the character motivations too much and that ruins it. I don't know. It is such a fine line. I suppose the mystery of a bad film is as intriguing as the mystery of a good film.

The fact is that I don't really like *Dekalog 7* and this fact in itself bothers me. I don't want to not like it. But it's the only *Dekalog* film that, for long stretches, I find genuinely boring. I kind of want to pretty much ignore it for that reason, especially since *Dekalog 8* is so amazing. Though *Dekalog 9* has some similar problems. Of course, with *Dekalog 9* I think that has to do partly with wanting to transition into something lighter, to add elements of silliness and humor that will then play out fully in *Dekalog 10*. But yes, 7 and 9 are problems for me. I don't know if this is worth talking about or not. I mean, if you've got something wonderful to salvage out of *Dekalog 7* I am all ears. Same thing I suppose with *Dekalog 9*. But I'm inclined to let those films more or less alone as examples of misses in the hit and



miss economy that is probably unavoidable in such an ambitious project as *Dekalog*.

in love and suffering,

morgan

June 28, 2020, 10:28 AM

Dear Morgan,

Reality—whatever that is—and nonfiction—whatever that means. The “Kieślowski” move here might be to challenge materialism by suggesting that we just don’t know if something more is open to us after death. In my Biblical Greek class at Cambridge, as I may have mentioned before, we were taught that Mark was the first Gospel in chronological terms and that the earliest version of the text ended with the discovery of Christ’s empty tomb after Mark 16:8, with Jesus’s women followers fleeing the burial site in fear, “trembling and bewildered.” Yet that emptiness itself implies something more. The mystery changes depending on how one reads its white-robed person promising later visions of the risen Jesus and the various sightings described after that. As to Jesus in Heaven sitting at the right hand of God, well, that’s not in the first version of the story. As you point out, the Resurrection story does not solve the problem of death, it only deepens it. And, yes, I see your point, it risks shifting the focus of Christianity away from being a disciple of Jesus, in attempting to live by his words, to a supernatural theology focused on some other world.

But, you know, when our dear friend Matt Power died on assignment in Uganda as a travel writer, I definitely felt his presence afterwards. He traveled to me and comforted me by placing his hand on my shoulder when I was half-asleep. This might have been a dream, but it brought me real solace. Matt seemed to be suggesting that he was going to be okay, but maybe what that really meant was that eventually things were going to be okay without him. Another case. After my grandmother’s death, she used to visit my mother in a tattered bathrobe and call out to her. This tormented my mom and, as it happened, formed a prelude to her mental breakdown. (She’s okay now, I’m happy to report.) How much more powerful would a postmortem visit from Jesus have been for his followers? This is William James

territory for me. I don't wish to discount these experiences as "unreal" but I have no clue what they mean. And, of course, they mean very different things to different people.

Kieślowski takes up the idea of the afterlife, in a deeply conflicted manner, in *No End*, *The Double Life of Veronique*, and, depending on how you read its suggestions of uncanny presences related to the protagonist's deceased husband and his posthumous musical composition, *Blue*. In the latter, one senses that Julie's husband is there in the mix of serendipity and synchronicity or the divine arrangements, to use a musical analogy, of love. Critics describe *No End* as a prelude to *Blue*, insofar as it depicts a widow's psychological journey, but also as a brutally critical counterweight to *Blue*, because of its lack of optimistic notes. (I think *No End* also contains the first of Piesiewicz's lawyer-characters for Kieślowski — Mieczysław Labrador [*Dekalog* 2's Aleksander Bardini] — who presages the studies of the legal profession in *Dekalog* 5/*A Short Film About Killing* and *Red*. The *Dekalog* is a lawyer-writer's contemplation of the meaning of laws, of course, whether/why they are necessary, and what they mean. More on that later.)

*No End* takes up precisely the problem you identify. The afterlife, if it exists, might not fix anything, perhaps it only continues our troubles in a new and disturbing form. Ulla (Grażyna Szapołowska), after seeing her husband, Antek (Jerzy Radziwiłowicz), appear to her after his death, eventually decides to "join him" (and to abandon their son) by taking her own life. Kieślowski describes the critical "thrashing" given to the film from both the government and the Church. One can see why. *No End* turns the conventionally religious idea of eternity on its head by taking it seriously. If it is a literal continuation of this life in another space — one the film implies is adjacent to our world and overlaps with it — then it "makes sense" for Ulla to kill herself in order to hasten the process of her reunion with her husband. This is blasphemous if taken at face value, of course.

What must have upset the Church most of all was the depiction of the lovers happy together at the end of the film.

But it's more plausible to view *No End* as a film that is less about morality and more about psychology. *No End* never condescends to Ulla's experience of her reality, with everything that implies, no matter how disturbing that might be to one's conventional ideas. It's not that *No End* advocates for suicide and child abandonment, of course. This is more of an attempt to create a compassionate account of a person who would do such a thing. Could such a deeply unethical decision be reframed as a humane story, not in terms of justification or glorification of suicide but rather in terms of basic sympathy for Ulla's ultimate act of grief? Kieślowski's humanism here overrides all other directives, political, ethical, or religious. I find it a deeply noble film that makes me want to live, not to die, and which reflects deeper truths about mental illness. (Not that it's all in her head—the film is careful to portray another character, played by *Dekalog*'s “angel,” Artur Barciś, who also sees the deceased husband.)

We seem to be very far afield from *Dekalog 7* and your questions about its value. In fact, Kieślowski is always circling back to the same themes. One of the most important of which is that our ideas about freedom might be illusory, or at least that freedom and liberation are not the same thing, and that our “life choices” rarely provide the autonomy we crave. Life-altering decisions involve us in deeper pain as often as not, and this is especially true when children are present. Ulla's act of despair in *No End* is, for her, a tragic selection of her love for her husband over her love for their son, or, perhaps, to really enter into her maze on its own terms, a judgment that one needs her more than the other, or that she needs one more than the other. This is not wholly dissimilar to the tragic logic of *Dekalog 7*, although here the impossible decision is between one's own freedom and being with one's child. I take these two films as bookends because they both treat their women protagonists' heartbreaking decisions, to let go of their children, with respect. In a sense, freedom is not pos-

sible when love is involved, and love all too often precludes happiness. We're caught in a trap of our own devising. To quote the song by Felice and Boudleaux Bryant, *love hurts*. Child-rearing is not the ultimate source of meaning for these women, and this is an idea that challenges both capitalist and religious pieties.

In *Dekalog 7*, Majka (Maja Barełkowska) has a daughter, Ania (Katarzyna Piwowarczyk), with her high school teacher, Wojtek (Bogusław Linda). To hide the affair, Ania is being raised by her grandmother, Majka's mother Ewa (Anna Polony), while the family pretends that Ania is Majka's little sister, not her daughter. To complicate things further, Ewa was the principal of the school that hired Wojtek, who left his job after the hushed-up scandal involving Majka. Wojtek became a toy-maker who assembles teddy bears in his isolated house. (The images of the bears provide some of the most poignant moments in the episode—he's a manual laborer who makes things for children to play with, despite being separated from his own child.) When Majka, now an adult, decides to emigrate to Canada, she "kidnaps" Ania and brings her to meet Wojtek, hiding out from Ewa while waiting for her train out of the country. Wojtek hints that he's willing to consider raising Ania together with Majka in the open, but Ewa has forbidden this outcome because it would expose the family secret about the events of the affair at the school. There's a devastating scene that unfolds on the platform at the end of *Dekalog 7* in which Ania runs to Ewa as Majka's train pulls away from the station.

I don't find the melodrama of *Dekalog 7* boring, maybe because it provides a little bit of a breather between the bombshells of *Dekalog 5* and *6* and the extraordinary drama of *Dekalog 8*. Thematically, it binds the personal with the political; the cost of women's liberation is reckoned with painful honesty in this intimate and private tragedy that bookends with the emphasis on women confronting public history together in *Dekalog 8*. I don't think I could bear it if the series moved between episodes *6* and *8* without anything between them. *Dekalog 7* becomes

even more intriguing if it is considered as a story that blends two readings of the Seventh Commandment, which, in the Christian world, is directed against stealing, in the Catholic version, and against adultery, in the non-Lutheran Protestant context. Of course, it's the stealing — the Catholic version of the Commandment — that resonates with Majka's kidnapping of her own child (who, in turn, has been stolen from her). But Majka's youth also has been stolen from her by her affair with her teacher.

The easy — and really disastrous — plot-turn would have involved the couple getting back together to raise Ania in some other city. Kieślowski doesn't allow this to happen, which strengthens the series artistically on multiple levels, one of which involves taking the Commandment seriously by treating it as a law not to be trifled with. (Not so much as a moral law, since we're not encouraged to look down on the characters, but rather as a law of fate, almost like a law of physics.) They — or Wojtek, as the adult — have violated both of its versions (adultery and stealing), and, therefore, they are not destined to prosper. This is harsh but feels true to life. Majka, despite her relative innocence in this situation, pays the ultimate price just for falling in love. This is too harsh, but, again, it feels true to life.

The focus of the adultery (if adultery is being considered here at all) is not on marriage but rather on the corruption of the mentoring relationship between pupil and teacher. Stolen youth in a relationship that is irreparably damaging and desperately unequal. For Kieślowski, once again ahead of his time, the affair is never treated as a joke or a game for older men, or as a self-actualizing liberation from social norms, but instead unfolds as a tragedy stemming from a mortal sin. Here the *Dekalog* series as a whole “reads” in more complex ways once the connective tissue between episodes is considered. If it is possible for a father to keep his hands off a person who might or might not be his daughter in *Dekalog 4*, we might be wondering at this point in the series, surely Wojtek and Majka might have refrained as well. It's not that we condemn them through finger-wagging, at

all, but rather that we come to understand their misery as an inevitable result of their misguided and botched attempt at love. They could not help themselves, and they are doomed.

There's an intriguing reframing of the function of the law here that seems very much of the Piesiewicz ethos. His lawyers and judges, as in *No End*, watch human beings ground up in the gears of the legal system, but the response of these characters seeks understanding and wisdom, not judgment and condemnation. Viewed in a wider sense, *Dekalog 7* provides hints about Piesiewicz's worldview as a sympathetic observer to those who are suffering from having broken the law, literally or metaphorically. His Christian humanism, grounded in compassion for sinners, takes the form of a kind of a confessor and advocate for the criminal element among us and in all of us. And, as a writer of fictions, some of which derive from his personal experience of Polish courts, he knows that it's the person who breaks the law or wrecks their life through violating the Commandments that makes for the most interesting story. But I also think he has an "Old Testament" sense of the fated or fatal elements of laws whose reach guides lives to their destinies far beyond the courtroom. The law is what's bound to happen. *Moirai* again.

Perhaps most interesting of all, in my view, *Dekalog 7* acts as a kind of prelude to *Dekalog 8*. The episode brings the element of family back into the picture of the series as a larger structure. The loss of a child in *Dekalog 1* and the impossible decision about whether or not to have a child in *Dekalog 2* — and the larger questions about who's child is whose and what makes for a family in *Dekalog 4* — need to return to the series at precisely this point. *Dekalog 7* provides that interstitial material leading up to *Dekalog 8*, which itself is about taking care of children and about a process that resembles adoption. What happens on a personal level in *Dekalog 7* is reprised at the collective and historical level in *Dekalog 8*. That element has faded a little bit in the onslaught of *Dekalog 5/A Short Film About Killing* and

*Dekalog 6/A Short Film About Love*, which are so powerful that they threaten to overwhelm and unbalance the series.

*Dekalog 7* restores balance by returning to the theme that used to be called “the family of man” (with all that is dubious about its universalist assumptions subject to question), and which is signaled by the flexible structure of the apartment complex and the urban environs of Warsaw as a metaphorical space that encompasses much more. So, my best case for *Dekalog 7* (which probably applies equally well to *Dekalog 9*) is that it provides more than a break or pause from the devastating experience of *Dekalog 8*. It also acts like a passage in a symphony that, while admittedly may not be the most memorable or famous sequence, remains necessary for reintroducing leitmotifs from earlier on in the work and allows the audience to anticipate and encompass a more full experience of how the work is threaded together. If *Dekalog* is more than the sum of its parts, *Dekalog 7* plays a role in that idea of the series as a single work of art rather than just a collection of individual stories. (*Dekalog 9* does the same in providing so many of the ingredients of Kieślowski’s career after the series — more on that later.)

I’m not certain whether you will be convinced about the merits of *Dekalog 7*, but perhaps we might agree on the function of the episode as a preface to *Dekalog 8*? What are your notes on that all-important eighth episode? For me, it appears as the intimidating summit of an Everest of cinema. I am not even sure where to begin.

Notes from your friend JMT

*P.S. Here is some chalk art I found on the sidewalk recently that spoke to me about the heartbreak of Dekalog 7.*





June 30, 2020, 3:52 PM

Dear Josh,

Okay, that's pretty good. I especially like your point that *Dekalog* 7 brings the element of family life back into the picture. In general, as I think I mentioned before, I like the way that *Dekalog* moves up and down the register of abstraction when it comes to "laws." This is something that happens in the Commandments themselves. They treat the Absolute and the mundane both. You get the feeling of awe and fear that is one aspect of an encounter with the Divine. You also get the super-mundane, the super-local. Stanley Hauerwas often quotes a Jewish theologian friend of his who likes to say that a religion that does not tell you what to do with your pots and pans and genitals cannot be interesting. The divine is not some vague feeling. I mean, it can be partly that but it must also be about the tiniest and seemingly insignificant aspects of day to day life down to the very bottom (no pun intended). Makes perfect sense to me that *Dekalog* 7 would shift the register in the pots and genitals direction. I still think it drags and plods in a bad way as a film. I still wonder why this is the case, given that a description of the film on paper would suggest that it's no less powerful and amazing to watch than any of the other *Dekalog* films. But I'm also fine to just accept that. Maybe even the unintentional lapse in quality allows us, as viewers of the entire *Dekalog*, to appreciate the fact that it is, overall, such an incredible work of art. The flaws enhance the beauty, or some such bullshit. But maybe true.

One thought on the death of Matt Power. I completely agree with you. Matt Power exists. I had an experience last winter where a fly, a very large fly, was somehow buzzing around the house in the coldest weather of the year. There are never those big, fat summer flies at that time. For some reason I suddenly proposed to Shuffy that it was Matt come to visit us. I said it as a kind of joke, but when I said it, something shifted in the room. It was eerie. Shuffy became very upset. I did too. Then

that damn fly just stayed around and buzzed and visited us for days, weeks. He wouldn't go away. I have no doubt that there are tons of psychological explanations for our transference of Matt qualities onto the fly. The point to me, though, is that his existence is so real, so powerfully in-the-world, even though he is dead, that his presence can now manifest in all sorts of ways. Matt is dead. But he still exists. On the other hand, saying that Matt is a fly also brings up, inevitably, the real things that were lost with the death of Matt. One of the things that made Matt, Matt, was that stupid incredible shit-eating delightful smile of his. You can't separate Matt from that smile. It was him in so many ways. I have a little picture of him on the bookshelf in my bedroom. That smile gets me every time I see it and I see it almost every day. The fact that Matt is dead means that the smile cannot happen on his actual face anymore. That thing is lost. We can remember it. We can look at pictures. The smile is not erased. But the physical possibility of encountering the smile in a living person is lost. And that is final, brutally, heartbreakingly final. Is there a way to talk about death that captures both the absolute finality and that also acknowledges the uncanny reality that the dead are with us, that death has nothing to do with cancelling existence, only with canceling life?

As to *Dekalog* 8, yes, indeed, yes, it is a heavy thing. The way that the 20th century fell on Poland, brutal. The suffering of Poland. And the crimes of Poland. So intertwined. And so hard for Poles to come to terms with. The crimes they suffered and the crimes in which they participated. One of the things that is profound, to me, about biblical and other ancient thoughts about sin (or crimes or whatever we want to call it) is that there is always an emphasis on time. Long stretches of time. The awful things we do to one another resonate down through the generations. This sort of links to some of the things we have been saying about death doesn't it? People don't just die. They die, but they stay around too. And we have to reckon with them over and over again. Of course, on the positive side, it also means that there is

always more time to get things right with people, with the ancestors, with the crimes and horrors of the past. But it goes on and on. Seven times seven generations. The sins that last an aeon. Whatever language you use. These matters are never cleaned up or dealt with easily. That fact does not typically sit well in contemporary life, which is more comfortable with the short stretches and which doesn't like the idea that wounds will take longer to heal than a human lifespan can encompass. But even today in 2020 we are, obviously, still dealing with the crimes of America's past, with the wound of slavery that will continue to reopen and that must continue to reopen. There is no way around it. The shit must come out. And it will. And it does.

To me, though, the moment that keeps poking at me in *Dekalog* 8 is the weird scene where the ethics professor is giving a lecture and then the drunk student suddenly staggers into the room. Maybe you know more about how that scene ended up in the film. Perhaps it is something that happened to Kieślowski or Piesiewicz when they were students. But I love that scene because it has no purpose. Or let's say the only purpose is to interrupt the scene, which is one in which people are thinking about life in a philosophical manner. That's to say, it starts out as an abstract sort of scene, taking a distance from life and thinking about it. And then this weird bit of uncontrollable life erupts. This bit of *Erlebnis*, as Walter Benjamin might call it, just drops like a turd right into the midst. It has the effect of trauma, which resonates so deeply with the fact that the philosophical discussion in the room is all about trauma and about the fundamental trauma of the Holocaust and how it is dropped like a turd into the modern history of Poland. The little trauma in the classroom mirrors the giant historical trauma everyone is trying to grapple with.

One of the most interesting and hilarious and sad and moving and tragic aspects of our experience is that we are always doing this work of making narratives and tidying up the jagged

edges of everything we are going through and then, just when we think we've got hold of a structure we can rely on or a story that seems to keep everything together, another bit of wild and turdy *Erlebnis* drops into the mix and the whole thing gets ruined and we've got to go back and try to package it all together again with more reflection and thinking. So the drunk student walking into the classroom is just that, he is the bit that doesn't fit, the eruption of raw experience that can't be accounted for or anticipated. And film is at its most powerful and most "mystical realist" when it is aware of that kind of eruption, when it is involved in showing us the dramatic interplay between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, to put it in fancy-pants terms. Films might resort to all kinds of tricks and techniques of the medium to do so, but that's not the point.

It strikes me suddenly, Josh... aren't we really asking whether reality itself is real? We can talk about film and realism. But aren't we talking about the nature of experience itself? How is that structured? I appreciate the fact that you keep bringing up how unreal, how contrived, how fictional is actually the art and craft of making a film. This is completely true. But so is life. It is structured as hell in one sense and a total chaos at the same time. At any moment, something is gonna happen and you can't know what, you can't even guess what it will be until it happens. I hesitate to call this a theory of film or a theory of realism since, in the end, it is more like trust. Another word for trust, of course, is faith. The faith and trust of the mystical realist film maker is the faith and trust that given just a little bit of opportunity reality will show itself as this complicated mess of things we can know and anticipate and things we cannot. A bit of *Erlebnis* will drop into the mix and the magic and mystery of experience will play itself out before our very eyes. It's like the drunk guy who staggers into the room just when we think we've got a nice and clean theory of ethics to let us know what to do next. But you can never know what to do when the drunk guy busts into the room, partly because you can never be sure what *he's* gonna do.

In one of his interviews, Kieślowski talks about making an early documentary that contained a scene with a doctor doing a procedure, I forget the exact details of the story. Doesn't really matter. But one of the doctors mentions to Kieślowski before shooting that this certain kind of tool always breaks. And then Kieślowski starts shooting and he just knows that the tool is going actually to break, really just break, as he is shooting, and then it does actually break. Which is crazy. But also Kieślowski just knew that there was no possibility other than that it would break. That is the faith and trust of the mystical realist film maker. The tool will break. The drunk guy will bust in. The lumpy turd of *Erlebnis* will drop into the room... somehow.

The opposite of the realist film maker is therefore not Cocteau. Cocteau is a mystical realist. The opposite of the realist film maker is someone like Steven Spielberg, who is, in a funny way, the true heir to the early films of Eisenstein. That's to say, there is a tradition in film making that does not have faith and trust in reality, does not want to let *Erlebnis* erupt where it may. This tradition thinks that the medium is about control. Spielberg never once let the camera roll just for the sake of rolling in his entire life. Such a thing would scare the crap out of him. This makes him quite a good storyteller, quite a master of suspense and timing, if that's what you want in a movie. And I can enjoy that sort of thing as much as the next guy....

I guess, though, that all of the films and the filmmakers I really love have an unruly quality to them, from outright sloppiness to a certain ungainly, amateurish aspect. Boredom can creep in watching these films. Realist movies have moments that drift or that fail to carry the story or plot at all, such as there is one. Loose ends all over the place. *Dekalog* is probably tighter than most in this regard. But, in the end, Kieślowski is a mystical realist in precisely this way. He gives space for the drama of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* and trusts in the weirdness and drama of reality

itself... and the drunk guy scene in *Dekalog* 8 just really nails that dialectic for me.

much love,

morgan

July 3, 2020, 6:24 PM

Dear Morgan,

I think you're right to bring things back down to earth with your talk of flies and dirt. After all, the slopes of Everest are covered in trash, and any holy mountain is bound to be a site of bloody contestation.

I've been suffering from a bout of seriously debilitating migraines recently, so it's fitting that we're discussing some heavy-duty theory. I don't want to sidetrack in our conversation about *Dekalog* 8, but I think this excursion illuminates the episode and the series in some surprising ways. Your viewpoint on cinematic realism sounds similar to that of Stanley Cavell and Richard Rushton. Rushton writes that, for Cavell,

films cannot be said to offer representations of the world or of some purportedly 'real' or 'true' world. Instead, films are exhibitions of the world; they offer experiences that are as much a part of reality as any other experience, perhaps even more so, for while at the movies, we are less on guard, more receptive, more vulnerable and less fearful of the possibilities the world is capable of offering to us. [...] The cinema does not present us with images that merely re-present various states or stages of the 'real' world; instead, the cinema has the ability to redefine for us what reality itself is.

This feels like a decent resting-place to bury our dispute amidst the quicksand of film theory. We could just leave it there, I suppose. But, then, again, we merely might be shifting the terms of the discussion from one term (reality) to another (experience) that is equally nebulous and confusing if we fall in line with Cavell and Rushton.

Maybe we should delve deeper into Walter Benjamin and your notes about his theories of art and experience (and those terms



you raised, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*). After all, you wrote a Ph.D. dissertation on Benjamin, and there's a lot written about him in contemporary cinema studies, as you might imagine, especially by Thomas Elsaesser ("Between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*: Cinema Experience with Benjamin," 2009) and Miriam Hansen (*Cinema and Experience*, 2011). It might be worth asking whether or not only the fragmented lived experience of *Erlebnis* is open to modern life, and whether the integrated sense of experience described by *Erfahrung*, as the creation of a coherent life-journey, can only ever be what Elsaesser calls an "ideological obfuscation or nostalgic (self-)deception."

Hansen, however, argues that Benjamin spent his life "theorizing the conditions of possibility of *Erfahrung* in modernity," linking its

historic decline with the proliferation of *Erlebnis* (immediate but isolated experience) under the conditions of industrial capitalism; in this context, *Erfahrung* crucially came to entail the capacity of memory — individual and collective — involuntary as well as cognitive — and the ability to imagine a different future.

This reading, then, moves beyond nostalgia about the past and proposes a different story that seems more open to the interplay between these two concepts of experience. Hansen's conception of *Erfahrung* in Benjamin involves a conception of connectedness and a (re)collection or projection of some past or future wholeness, however fugitive or seemingly impossible under current conditions.

I like Hansen's reading because it's more open to alternatives regarding the spiritual elements in Benjamin's thinking, particularly in his early work. In 1913 Benjamin wrote of "Experience" that

“to experience” [*Erleben*] without spirit is comfortable, if unredeeming. Again: we know a different experience. It can be hostile to spirit and destructive to many blossoming dreams. Nevertheless, it is the most beautiful, most untouchable, most immediate because it can never be without spirit...

This reading from a younger Benjamin as a writer who wishes to leave open the possibility for something more redeeming and beautiful, despite the ravages of modernity, and despite the historical processes that have exiled spirit to an ever-diminishing corner of the room, so to speak, appeals to me. I align with Hansen’s attempt to complete Benjamin’s project by bringing his work into the present, where it calls us to ask whether more humane alternatives yet can be imagined within the space of modernity. If all this represents something other than self-deceptive nostalgia, then we might be in a similar realm to the one that Derrida invoked in his phrase from *Of Grammatology* (1976) about glimpsing “the yet unnamable glimmer beyond the closure,” the hints of which Benjamin also seemed to be alive to registering in his more spiritually inclined moments.

Sorry for another lengthy detour. What does all this have to do with Kieślowski? Perhaps what we’re witnessing in the *Dekalog* is an attempt by the filmmakers and the characters to “put their lives in order,” in more than one sense, using the Ten Commandments as a flexible premodern structure for doing so. On one level, this seems to provide the very “epic truth,” and the joined-up story of the self, implied by *Er*. The film in the viewer’s head *fahrung*, that Benjamin claims is missing from modern life. An alternative interpretation might posit that the series only reveals how all these attempts to provide structure always fail, and that we keep seeing the impossible mismatches emerge between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* once the scaffolding inevitably falls away, and reveals its promise of some regular shape to be an impossibility that isn’t true to life, at least as it is lived in the present. That’s more or less what happens with the Eighth Commandment — “Thou shalt not bear false witness” — in *Dekalog*

8, isn't it? The Commandment is used to structure the story at first, but, then, awkwardly, it seems to break down and it rapidly loses its explanatory or ordering force within the narrative. Actually, the meaning and application of "false witness" mutates as the story unfolds.

If something like this is what you mean by an interplay between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, that strikes me as a valuable summation of the dynamics operating within the *Dekalog* series as a whole. (Assuming that it makes some sense to treat it as a "whole" — a nearly nine-and-a-half-hour film and epic work of art — rather than a bunch of episodes.) As a total reading of the series, we could do worse than this. The filmmakers, just as much as the characters, know that under normal conditions ("the way we live now") there only seems to be *Erlebnis*, even while everyone yearns for something more, something redolent of *Erfahrung*. This might or might not involve an assembly from memory or a utopian projection into a time to come. It might never happen. And, in fact, it might be nothing more than a pernicious fiction or a form of nostalgia for a time when life was (supposedly) better ordered (morally, spiritually, aesthetically, etc.) than now. We try to project coherent narratives or posit the existence of laws or even Commandments that we can use to measure ourselves, to guide our path from here to there, and, in this specific sense, to control the story of our lives, as it were. But maybe this is not possible, certainly not now, maybe not ever. Then again, maybe there is more to the story?

This reading of the series cuts both ways. It might be said that Kieślowski clings somewhat quaintly to this impossibility of restoring some sense of classical order amidst the chaos of modern life. In this sense, *Dekalog*, like *Three Colors*, provides structures that tend in the direction of an ambiguous premise of some kind, regarding a more durable, perhaps even spiritual, shape to things. In this regard, Kieślowski might be seen to be falling into the trap of attempting to construct or interpolate some false or artificial sense of *Erfahrung*. And, therefore, Kieślowski

might be indulging in a nostalgia (that deadly but common process of obfuscation and self-deception described by Elsaesser, above) for an order that no longer exists. Even worse, it might be Kieślowski's tendency to embrace the cosmic, the spiritual, and the religious that leads him into this very trap. Your point about *Erlebnis* nicely cuts against this reading and helps to explain why it feels incomplete.

The ambiguity in Kieślowski's work allows for these opposing forces to pull insights from the work in both directions simultaneously. The laws of *Dekalog* and colors of *Three Colors* might only be artificial structures, after all, patterns overlaid on the messiness of things. Or maybe there is more to it — "it" meaning both these films and, maybe, also, life. To me, this double-sided or double-edged character of Kieślowski's films calls out to something deeply human, and humane. To be alive in the world means to wonder about whether the idea of order is only a fiction or whether there is something to it, to recognize the insufficiency of narrative or mythological structures and yet to find oneself unable to dispense with them entirely, to see them fail to measure things, events, and people correctly, and yet to find them of value or consolation in other moments. Then again, this line of thought itself might be dismissed as an obsolete humanism (or worse) that latches on to the nostalgic elements of art in a denial of the basic problem of modernity, which is that *Erfahrung* seems impossible and only *Erlebnis* appears to be available to play around with, and in. And around we go.

You relate the story of the drunken student in *Dekalog* 8 as an example of how the jagged and fragmented quality of *Erlebnis* intrudes into the frame of the series (and life), upsetting all of our carefully constructed ideas of order. I agree with you that his entrance into the classroom feels just right in its off-ness and asymmetry. In fact, there's another student who condemns his disrespectful behavior, providing a moment of light relief and perfect pacing in the narrative, also giving us, the viewers, a place to pause and breathe, in a scene that might otherwise feel

very abstract and overly talky in a ping-pong-like game of dialogue.

Yet even this seemingly throw-away moment in the episode does not fail to resonate on a deeper level. The censorious student who condemns the drunk speaks in *English*, and it's possible that he's a Muslim character, which could explain the offense he takes at this display of public inebriation. Is Kieślowski portraying this character's rule-following denunciation of others as an overly strict reading of a religious code of conduct? If so, Kieślowski is also cleverly recapitulating the thematics of the entire episode in this tiny comical exchange. That's analogous to the problem with the Eighth Commandment that is examined in the episode, viz., that it seems insufficient on its own to carry real weight in the human story about to unfold.

Another example of this balance of clashing elements in *Dekalog* 8 involves its curious sidebar on 1980s exercise culture. Kieślowski presents his philosophy professor character, Zofia (Maria Kościółkowska) in her jogging outfit during her daily workout routines. And yet the main story involves a confrontation with a traumatic episode from her past, one that also takes in the national and world trauma of Poland's historical relationship to the Shoah. Here the trivial and the mundane (which you nicely term the "super-local") mixes with the deepest possible collective pain imaginable. As the episode proceeds, a visitor to Zofia's classroom, Elżbieta (Teresa Marczevska) turns out to have been a Jewish kid that, decades earlier, Zofia had turned away from protective shelter during the nazi terror in 1943 Warsaw.

This might be nothing more than a coincidence, but it's worth noting in passing that *Dekalog* 9 links exercise with suicide, while *Dekalog* 8 presents a picture of a nation of aging get-fit fans whose banal pastimes in the 1980s exist in an incredibly distressing (non-)relationship with their actions in the 1940s. To me, this suggests that the dominant realm of *Erlebnis*, as splin-

tered and incoherent modern experience, is unconquerable, but I think the episode eventually will challenge that view by providing hints about the dormant possibility for *Erfahrung*. Breathing deep of the fresh air of forests surrounding Warsaw (places, however, that one imagines haunted with buried trauma), Zofia, on her run, encounters a contortionist. The contortionist seems to externalize the moral state of individual and collective experience of people and countries that tied themselves in knots during WWII.

How can these appallingly uneven and disturbingly disparate registers exist in the same story? The answer must be that they also exist in reality or experience, within the same country, the same city, and even the same person. That's life. The larger question raised by the episode is the same one raised by the entire series. Is there, in memory, in the future, in the work of art, or in the spiritual realm, something of what Coleridge called a "secret ministry," even if this ministry seems to be fleeting or lacking altogether in the jaggedness of daily existence? Are there eternal moral laws that matter, should we follow them, and, if so, how? How is it possible that these ideas of order seem to lead us astray as often as they guide us home?

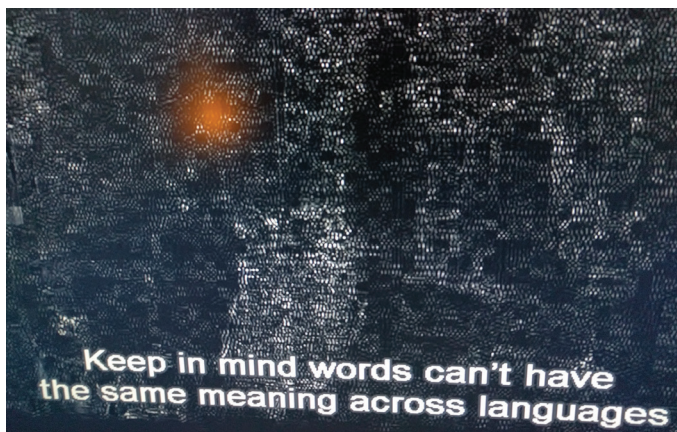
I think it's reasonable to divide *Dekalog* 8 into three interconnected segments, with important linking scenes in between those segments that add further resonances or complications. The first segment takes place in Zofia's classroom and its environs. The second one involves the journey of Zofia and Elżbieta into the past, in order to take account of Zofia's actions during the war, with the hope in mind of creating some connection between them of value to their shared idea of the future. The third segment follows Zofia and Elżbieta on a visit to a sad little tailor's shop in a different neighborhood of Warsaw, where a man lives who saved Elżbieta's life in 1943 after Zofia rejected her.

I've written around 5000 more words on the episode already, but I don't want to inflict them on you boorishly in one dam-burst

without your permission. How would you like to proceed from here? Would you prefer to take up a different reading of Walter Benjamin's concepts of experience and art, or are you ready to move on into the heart of the story of *Dekalog* 8? Do you think it makes better sense to take each of these three segments of the episode in turn, or would you prefer to read and respond to my entire rambling and rickety notes on the whole narrative?

Notes from your friend JMT

*P.S. Here is a snapshot that bears on our discussion of these heavy German words and concepts — this is what happened when my DVD player broke down while it was playing Jules et Jim....*



July 7, 2020, 12:16 PM

Dear Josh,

Yes. That is my response to this last letter from you. Yes.

I would add only that I am, personally, loath to work Benjamin's thoughts on *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* into too much of an actual, coherent theory of experience. Benjamin, in my understanding of him, just was not a systematic philosopher. That much is probably easy to accept. But he also wasn't one to provide anything like well worked out theories. Something that Adorno was constantly scolding him about. Also, I don't think Benjamin was ever exactly sure what he meant by *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. In different essays he's playing around with different aspects of the terms and with his own shifting conception of what human experience is all about. I'm not especially a fan, for instance, of the essay that Benjamin is probably most famous for, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The views put forward there about film's revolutionary potential strike me as very close to silly.

Another thing that I think is sometimes missed when it comes to Benjamin on *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* is that they don't cut just one way. Point being, there is a side of Benjamin that is hostile to *Erfahrung* and that always sees *Erlebnis* as the radical, unruly, unaccountable eruption of the Real into every attempt to organize or synthesize experience as a whole. On the other hand, one of the problems with Modernity, as you've pointed out, is that it so pulverizes and fragments experience that *Erfahrung* never has a chance. Benjamin was constantly trying to hold both these ideas together without falling into a simplistic scenario where *Erfahrung* is good and *Erlebnis* bad or vice versa. Is the flaneur a triumphant figure in Benjamin or a figure to be criticized? Is the loss of aura a thing to be lamented or a genuine historical achievement? I would say that these are all poorly formulated



questions when it comes to Benjamin. A person who asks questions like this is going to get bad answers and write boring books.

So, your notes on *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* as they relate to *Dekalog* work well for me. Personally, I wouldn't want to push them much further than that.

I also want to say that I genuinely enjoy reading your breakdowns of the various films of *Dekalog* and anticipate that I will enjoy much if not all of what you have to say about the three sections of *Dekalog* 8. But may I also say that that kind of exhaustive, three-part analysis also sort of pre-fills me with a sense of exhaustion? Maybe this is similar to my resistance to the attempts to over-theorize Benjamin's so-called Philosophy of Experience.

There is a wariness about saying too much. As I've gotten older and become, I suppose, more and more of a mystic myself I have a wariness of saying too much. That's the fact of it. In my own writing, my writing that is closest to my own heart, I like to make less and less sense the more I penetrate into something, if you know what I mean. I like to circulate around things I can't really say. I like to acknowledge that I start to sound ridiculous, that everyone starts to sound ridiculous the more they try to get hold of the core of something. It slips between the fingers. Benjamin means something by the distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* and I think we can get the sense of what he means. But he had the good sense also to leave the contours fuzzy. There is an unsaid doctrine here that must remain unsaid.

My instinct around *Dekalog* 8, which is, as you say, so big and overwhelming and heavy in what it takes on, is to peck and worry at the edges and the weird spots. That's why I gravitate toward the moment with the drunk and scenes like that. In some sense, I suppose, I don't trust the bigness of *Dekalog* 8. I'm wary that this bigness contains traps and tricks. Likewise, if someone wrote a book titled, say, *Benjamin and the Concept of Aura*, I

would be absolutely sure not to read such a book. It would be irreligious to read such a book. A sin.

So, honestly, I'm a little scared of your three-part breakdown of *Dekalog* 8. On the other hand, as I said before, I'm sure I'll enjoy what you have to say. Also, I realize that what I'm saying here verges on the ridiculous. In the end, this doesn't worry me. I'm fine with being ridiculous. My daimonion tells me to stay away from certain things and so I do.

*sagaciter moti sunt,*

morgan

July 8, 2020, 1:09 PM

Dear Morgan,

It's so funny and heartening to me that we are such diametrical opposites in our temperaments. I'm somebody who needs the talking cure, words words word, blah blah blah, speaking endlessly and provisionally (and in error) around these questions we're discussing in loops and circles. Thanks for listening.

I think you've identified why Benjamin always seems to speak to the present. It's not in spite of but rather because of those "fuzzy contours" you describe in his writing. One thing I like about Hansen's book is that she emphasizes his early work and its permeability to spiritual searching in general and Jewish mysticism in particular. Another thing I appreciate about Hansen is her unfolding of Benjamin's concept of the "optical unconscious" and her exploration of the connective tissue between it and Kracauer's own ideas about what he called "camera reality." These are concepts in film theory that attempt to get around the dichotomies of subjectivity and objectivity that you were criticizing before. Hansen wishes to rejoin elements in Benjamin's thinking with Kracauer's more "positive" critical stance regarding the liberating potential in modern popular culture (and cinema in particular), which obviously exists in tension with Adorno's dour viewpoint on the Culture Industry.

Hansen writes of Kracauer:

Much as the film — and, to different degrees, any film — seeks to direct our attention, it simultaneously allows the viewer to get sidetracked by details or wander to the margins and corners of the screen, or to commit to memory transient, contingent images. For Kracauer, this spectatorial mobility is the condition for a centrifugal movement in yet another direction: away from the film, into the labyrinths of the viewer's imagination, memories, and dreams, that is, "the film in the

viewer's head." This process takes the viewer into a dimension beyond, or below, the illusory depth and diegetic space, beyond/below the "intersubjective protocols" and particular kinds of knowledge that govern our understanding of narratives, into the at once singular and historical-collective realm of experience, the striated, heterogeneously aggregated, partly frozen, partly fluid *Lebenswelt*. It is in Kracauer's insistence on the possibility of such openings that we can hear an echo, albeit muted, of his earlier vision of cinema as an alternative public sphere, a sensory and collective horizon for people trying to live a life in the interstices of modernity.

This "*Lebenswelt*," then, is related to "camera reality." Somewhat like Benjamin's "optical unconscious," it proposes a "dimension" of cinema as a medium that is not limited by the intentions of filmmakers, the commercial imperatives of the exhibition and distribution apparatus, the critical reception of viewers and critics, or even the personal experiences of individual cinema-goers, for that matter. It's a way to view films (and "Film," as a modern artform) apart from their (its) storylines, genre conventions, or characters, meditating instead on how cinema allows us to project the world differently, in modes of collective dreaming, by focusing on marginal elements of moving pictures. By this means, we also discard an individualistic view of cinematic art and moviegoing, in a move that is inevitably political in the sense of being public.

This also allows us access to an experience elicited by cinema that, by implication, might be radically different from the expressed ideology of a given movie. Kracauer uses the examples of D.W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein. Griffith's worth, for Kracauer, lies in how he films Mae Marsh's hands in *Intolerance* (1916), in order to ask what a hand *is* or means. Eisenstein, similarly, films fog and waves in the funeral section of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) in such a way that allows for an "allusive indeterminacy" to emerge, a "suggestive rendering of physical events." Extrapolating from this, it seems that we aren't tied solely to Eisenstein's

Leninist program, Griffiths's revisionist propaganda, or even to the direct action of the plot, for that matter, by the medium of film itself. This critical concept arguably gives the viewer a place to shelter from the battering rams of reductive political discourse promoted in the films. Something like this theory is needed to help explain cinema's impact in total because the interest of films cannot be limited to auteurist notions of artistic intentions or to the industrial imperative of most movies, which often involve retrograde ideologies and sensationalistic approaches to audience manipulation. But is that all there is?

Kracauer's camera-reality does not simplify the film into a unified artwork that carries a message inside of it to be cracked. It's not that the viewer can do whatever they want with a film, either, but rather that the medium-specific elements of the form itself allow for an alternate space in which our collective ideas and image-banks (about hands, mist, waves, faces, and so forth) may be rethought by the viewer. So, for Hansen, this is all about cinema's role in finding less maladaptive yet still thoroughly modern ways to live that draw on visual culture and that do not reject modernity itself wholesale in favor of reactionary nostalgia (nor do they accept the ruthlessly exploitative system of capitalism as how things are or must be). An optical unconscious, to shift from Kracauer's critical concept to Benjamin's, parallels the collective unconscious and the political unconscious, but exists in a logically distinctive, if overlapping, zone. It's here that we might assemble an archive of moving images (and images that move us) that might help to envision a more livable future.

All this by way of agreeing with you that it's the "edges and weird spots" of the *Dekalog* that seem to draw our attention. I relate this to Hansen's talk of "margins and corners of the screen." I'm thinking here, again, of that repeated image of the old lady struggling to place a glass bottle into a street recycling bin that recurs throughout *Three Colors*. In *Blue*, Julie sits at a cafe, oblivious to the elderly woman's struggles, while in *Red*, Valentine rushes over to help her complete this banal task. In a

way these episodes are extraneous to both stories and in another sense they contain the essential poetry of how the stories are connected with one another. These are the moments that Mark Cousins, in his 2011 documentary *The Story of Film*, refers to as a modern use of cinema as “an empathy machine,” a problematic but useful phrasing. This idea challenges the commercial view of cinema as a thrill ride. (Cousins claims that film is about “ideas, not money.”)

Another way to think about these moments in Kieślowski is through your felicitous idea of a “radical, unruly, unaccountable eruption of the Real into every attempt to organize or synthesize experience as a whole.” Perhaps in the concept of the optical unconscious there might be some as yet undreamed synthesis or interplay between elements that seem antithetical. Or maybe not. That’s the hope I hear encoded in your capitalization of the letter “R” in “Real.” Such moments in the pictures pull us, as viewers, away from the plotlines of the film we’re watching in order to confront us with fragmentary outbursts of life, while at the same time adding images to an archive of collective dreaming by which we might arrange our hopes for a more cohesive life-journey through this crazy, mixed-up world.

You mention your reluctance to speak of certain things, matters of the spirit. Fair enough. I find your drift well encapsulated in that capitalization of the word “Real.” Yes, there are these moments or experiences or encounters or ways of seeing when and where reality seems to contain two levels simultaneously, the ultra-local and the super-mundane, on one hand, and the spiritual or potentially transcendent realm, on the other. There’s a poetic sensibility here similarly structured to a well-written haiku, as a way of encountering the world which reveals both a common detail of existence and a poetic iteration of Buddha-nature. Doesn’t Tarkovsky compare the cinematic image with the haiku somewhere in *Sculpting in Time*? In Buddhism this Buddha-nature is said to exist in all things as an expression of emptiness and transience that also challenges the materialism of

a “dead” world and suggests something... more. And this cannot be limited to something that’s “all in our minds,” to be sure. It arises in the encounter with the world, with others, and perhaps with art.

Here I am once again reminded of Benjamin’s experience of aura under the influence of hashish in 1930, in which he described aura as a property inherent to or discernable “in all things, not just in certain things, as people imagine.” There are key differences between these mystical insights from divergent traditions and texts, of course, but I wonder if they largely occur in non-dualistic experiences where language tends to be a very blunt and clumsy instrument for describing what happens. That brings me back to your comments about preferring to speak less and less. I would not have dared to write the word “real” with a capital “R,” but that is a pretty good resting-point for describing the differences between our views. Both the lower case and the capital letter are needed, I think. For the Huayan Buddhists, the realms of ultimate divine reality and mundane emptiness are said to interpenetrate in a total sense, allowing one to examine them conceptually as two but to experience them (ideally) as one. Sounds nice.

The entrance of the drunken student and the encounter with the contortionist in *Dekalog* 8 provide somewhat similar moments of simultaneous “lower case-ness” and “capitalization” throughout the series. From the strange alien texts created by the green screen of the computer in *Dekalog* 1 to the bee in *Dekalog* 2, the skateboarding railway employee in *Dekalog* 3, the water fights between father and daughter in *Dekalog* 4, the girls at the cafe window who play innocently with the murderer Jacek in *Dekalog* 5, Tomek’s postal office and milk delivery jobs in *Dekalog* 6, the pile of teddy bears in *Dekalog* 7, the record store listening posts and the music of the fictional composer, Van den Budenmayer, in *Dekalog* 9, all the way to that very ordinary set of postage stamps that closes *Dekalog* 10 and the series.... All these moments have an analogous resonance with each other

and with the images of the woman with her recycling in *Three Colors*, no? And, of course, there is the tower block apartment complex itself. We are every one of us separate, isolated, apart, and liable to the disconnected experiences of modern life. And yet we're also somehow related to one another, if not as a family then in more nebulous and loosely joined-up ways, yearning to follow threads that link us with others, like a great cat's cradle of lives trailing those invisible strands or strings that might connect us, like the ones described in the novels of Virginia Woolf.

I'm risking repeating myself here because these are the basic structures of the questions posed by the *Dekalog*. But I also think there's a sense in which this dynamic reflects a fundamental tension between the ideas of Kieślowski and Piesiewicz. Maybe this is too tidy a summary of such a complicated and long-lived artistic partnership, but I see Piesiewicz as a writer who wishes to project an idea of order about the world (and people's lives) and Kieślowski as a director who manages to work a paradox into every corner of the picture, introducing double-sided or contradictory aspects into each of his writer's stories. Premise: The reason why the ambiguity in the series is so delicious and finely balanced on so many levels is related to the fact that the *Dekalog* has these two main authors. Their worldviews overlap but also clash and contradict at key points.

I will close this overly lengthy detour into film theory (and beyond!) with a personal note. I think I'm writing more and more notes on these episodes not in an attempt to exhaust or bore you, but instead because I don't want our exchange of letters to finish just yet. I can foresee the completion of our project looming closer each week and I think I want to put it off a little while longer. One way to do that is to slow down the pace and introduce great blocks of philosophical texts, replete with the most difficult concepts from film theory that I can find. :) I kid, of course, but, also, maybe not. This entire process and our agreeable disagreements have been a source of solace amidst the chaos, violence, and mass death that marks this year of our Lord



2020 and our era's attempt to pulverize the sustained attention span required for (and by) art. Thank you, my friend. I take your "Yes" as a green light to continue with these notes. But I also get your drift about the problem of verbiage when confronted with mysteries one would like to leave intact. I also applaud your approach as a savvy strategy — rope-a-dope! Yes, let me wear out my jaw while you observe me flailing and tilting at windmills, with a bemusement that is not unkind.

One of the reasons why the narrative of *Dekalog* 8 is so rich and complex is partly because it is a story about stories, and about storytelling. In the section of the episode that transpires in Zofia's classroom, we're first introduced to a retelling of the storyline from *Dekalog* 2, about the doctor forced to advise a woman having an affair about whether or not to keep her unborn child or have an abortion, at a moment when her husband appears to be terminally ill. As the series nears its completion, *Dekalog* continues to gather up its own threads into new patterns — that cat's cradle effect that forms new shapes as its multiple points of contact shift.

This self-referential facet of the series also offers another instance in which realism and elements of something akin to metafiction overlap, insofar as we, the audience, are watching a storyteller tell a story — one that we've already watched! As the classroom scene unfolds and shifts to another philosophical problem, we also get some reaction shots of the Artur Barciś character, now a student in the university, as he responds to the stories being told in Zofia's classroom. More and more stories within stories — yet without breaking the spell.

Then things take an unexpected turn for Zofia in her classroom. The consideration of life or death as it relates to the story of a child, in the first philosophy problem, provides Elżbieta with an opening to tell her own story in front of Zofia's students. Elżbieta has returned to Poland from New York in order to talk to the people involved with her wartime trauma as a Jewish refugee

who narrowly escaped the nazis. But she initially treats her story as a philosophical problem — as a story, in other words — representing what Zofia has called “ethical hell” in her own rendition of the decision of the doctor from *Dekalog* 2. Elżbieta asks Zofia about another such impossible dilemma, in which a Jewish child turns up after the nazi-imposed curfew, seeking shelter for the night at the home of a Catholic couple who have agreed to be her godparents. But the couple turns her away. As Elżbieta tells the story, treating it as hypothetical — fiction — Zofia realizes what Elżbieta tactfully has hidden from the class. Her story is about what really happened when Elżbieta was taken to Zofia’s house during the war some forty years earlier, in 1943.

Zofia was, without question, on the wrong side of history that night, and she knows it. But Elżbieta hasn’t wasted her time returning to Warsaw for the superficial satisfaction of outing Zofia for her actions during the war, or trying to get her fired from her post as a professor. Instead of wishing to dominate her or take the paltry satisfaction of revenge, she wants to know why Zofia did what she did. She is therefore much more than a victim, she’s a survivor-detective in a mystery involving history’s darkest hour. *Dekalog* 8 has the courage to treat all of this non-revenge as strength not weakness on Elżbieta’s part. And it links this act of courage directly to her faith. Elżbieta wears a necklace ornamented with both Jewish and Christian symbols, the former representing her family heritage and the latter symbolizing acquired beliefs, presumably.

Perhaps like the doctor in *Dekalog* 2, Elżbieta worships what he had called, in the earlier episode, “a private god,” or, at least, a syncretic one? In a moment of deep tenderness later on in the episode, one that avoids any hint of mawkishness or false piety, Zofia witnesses Elżbieta praying before bedtime. Although we cannot know what she’s praying for — or to what — we might gather that Zofia remains in her thoughts. Somehow, she has maintained her faith in Zofia all these years as a person of more complexity and goodness than the action she herself had

witnessed as a child. This faith is seemingly baseless but it is proved correct in a way that challenges materialism and secular rationality. There's a more ennobling understanding of fate being unfolded here, one which the series has earned at great cost. Ultimately, *Dekalog* sides with the believers. Kieślowski, too, believes in something — in people and in forces beyond our ken — and he understands that this requires faith of some kind, even if the form of that faith is, well, pretty damned mysterious.

Elżbieta's reasons for proceeding in this manner are important. Her goal is to understand Zofia's actions — to try to come to terms with something that seems incomprehensible and evil — rather than trying to make herself feel better by condemning Zofia or attempting to destroy her. In this humane quest to understand what is seemingly impossible to comprehend, Elżbieta may well be the strongest possible contender for a stand-in for the filmmakers of the *Dekalog*. (Even more so than Barciś, perhaps, who remains in his own zone of the uncanny — or the angelic otherworldly — in his silent witnessing. In fact, all the characters in their way are stand-ins for the filmmakers, in the specific sense that Flaubert invoked when he said something along the lines of "I am Emma Bovary" or "Madame Bovary is me.")

This gentle approach pursued by Elżbieta, this softness that is strength, in turn, gives Zofia the chance to be understood, and she seizes that opportunity with all gratitude. They spend the day and the evening together. Zofia insists on offering her a room for the night, pointedly hoping to reverse the irreversible crime which she committed in the past. Their reconciliation in Warsaw, while it appears to replay the trauma of the past symbolically in a more therapeutic or reparative setting, does not alter the past, of course. Instead it offers a way to live with the nightmare of history without succumbing to its powerful spell of despair and without denying one's own personal and collective complicity in its horrors.

With your patience, I'd like to take a step back and unfold that scene in Zofia's classroom in more detail. "It's 1943," the story goes. February. Winter. The main character of this story within the story is a six-year-old Jewish girl. Her father is in the Warsaw ghetto. Refuge is sought for the girl, to get her out of harm's way. New guardians are sought to take in the child, but as Catholics, they demand a certificate for baptism. The girl is brought to this young couple who've agreed to be godparents at the baptism, but this baptism has not yet occurred, it would seem. So this couple, the potential godparents for this baptism, have to "go back on their promise" to save the child. Why? "They've decided they cannot lie before the God in whom they believe..." The Eighth Commandment. No false witness.

And it is precisely at this point in the episode that the Barciś character, in his new guise as a student in the lecture hall, seems, for an instant, to confront the viewer of the film directly, by doing what's forbidden in a realistic film. He looks into the camera directly, or appears to. The shots and editing plan move swiftly to reassert realism by implying that he also might be staring at Zofia. But it's too late. We realize that we are implicated in this story, especially if "we" are the original Polish audience for this film that transmits a powerful national guilt about those who looked away during WWII.

The classroom story goes on to describe "a God who, it is true, enjoins acts of mercy...but also forbids bearing false witness." The professor's eyes close sadly here. Back to Artur Barciś — he's looking at her/us. She is "us," the human family that sends its children out to die in the night at the hands of evil men. The discussion turns to an investigation of the motives of such a harsh decision. In essence, this involves an old philosophical problem, the idea of lying in order to save someone's life. The lie here would be that the child is baptized when she's not. The Catholic godparents turn her away, it's claimed in the classroom version of the story, because it would be a lie to call themselves her godparents before she's baptized.

I'm indebted to our friend, the philosopher Steven Levine, for pointing out that Kant outlines a very similar situation in his essay "On a Supposed Right to Lie" (1797). Kant writes:

For example, if by telling a lie you have in fact hindered someone who was even now planning a murder, then you are legally responsible for all the consequences that might result therefrom. But if you have adhered strictly to the truth, then public justice cannot lay a hand on you, whatever the unforeseen consequences might be. It is indeed possible that after you have honestly answered Yes to the murderer's question as to whether the intended victim is in the house, the latter went out unobserved and thus eluded the murderer, so that the deed would not have come about. However, if you told a lie and said that the intended victim was not in the house, and he has actually (though unbeknownst to you) gone out, with the result that by so doing he has been met by the murderer and thus the deed has been perpetrated, then in this case you may be justly accused as having caused his death. Therefore, whoever tells a lie, regardless of how good his intentions may be, must answer for the consequences resulting therefrom even before a civil tribunal and must pay the penalty for them, regardless of how unforeseen those consequences were. This is because truthfulness is a duty that must be regarded as the basis of all duties founded on contract, and the laws of such duties would be rendered uncertain and useless if even the slightest exception were admitted.

To be truthful (honest) in all declarations is, therefore, a sacred and unconditionally commanding law of reason that admits of no expediency whatsoever.

What's interesting to note, vis-à-vis Kiesłowski and *Dekalog* 8, is that Kant's position regarding the "sacred and absolutely commanding decree" of the Eighth Commandment, as ascribed to the Catholic couple in the classroom story, is immediately found wanting. Kiesłowski is criticizing the Kantian modern faith in

reason as well as the incorporation of the modern faith in reason into faith itself, since the Catholic couple is seen to be rendering the letter of the Kantian law rather than the spirit of the religious impulses toward charity and compassion for the child. So then perhaps it is not religion per se that is being questioned so much as a modern interpretation of religious ethics that feels so rigidly untrue to its ancient sources. After all, Jesus had a strong tendency towards rule-breaking by healing on the Sabbath and so forth.

Maybe there is a subtle argument here that religion has been overly modernized and Kant-ified. When Zofia, on her run through the forest later on in the episode, witnesses the contortionist doing his thing, he encourages her to try out being more flexible. As we watch her trying to twist a little, we cannot escape the feeling that it was the Catholic couple's lack of flexibility that got them into such an "ethical hell" in 1943. But how far can we contort ourselves without bending totally out of shape? A "Polish" question that is also a question for all of us.

In the classroom discussion, the students search for "other motives" for the couple's actions in turning away the Jewish child, but they are left grasping at straws. Nobody takes up Kant's unpersuasive viewpoint itself. Instead, the Catholic couple's apparent hewing to Kantian lines is seen as so implausible that an alternative explanation of their actions must be sought. "What other motives could there have been?" asks Elżbieta, in her "undercover" role as a visiting scholar from America to Zofia's class. "I don't understand. I can't think of a motive justifying this decision." One male student answers: "Fear." The situation is not resolved in class, and that is because it cannot be resolved in class. Zofia closes with an assignment: "I want each of you to prepare your own account of the ethical issues involved here." A Philosophy 101 assignment, perhaps, but one from which any viewer of the *Dekalog* can benefit.

All this, however, is merely a prelude for what comes next in the episode. Any objections or further wrinkles to discuss before I launch myself deeper into the complexities and patterns of *Dekalog* 8? Or am I on the wrong path here? Would you prefer to lead a different kind of sortie altogether into the narrative?

Notes from your friend JMT

July 15, 2020, 12:18 PM

Josh,

I liked your little “confession” about adding as much film theory as humanly possible just to keep the discussion going. Very sweet actually. I sometimes wonder if all the complexity of theory in general is just a way to keep some kind of conversation going, a way to keep talking.

As to the questions you ask at the end of your letter, I’m fine to let you complete your lecture here, professor. :) I mean, you’ve already set it all up. I’m not really sure, to be honest, that I should be writing anything to you right now. This is your show at the moment. And, of course, the thing that needs to be said next is that this whole moral quandary is going to be given another massive twist so that the so-called Kantian dilemma that seemed to frame *Dekalog* 8 becomes something else entirely. But I don’t want to steal your thunder, since you’ve done so much good work preparing for the next moment in the film.

One little thing I would, perhaps, insert into the discussion, and you do touch on it obliquely here and there, is the importance of history. This is an especially Polish relationship to history. History as a heavy thing. History as an actual physical weight. The Church as a repository of history and a place that preserves history in the face of all the forces that would cancel it. The Church also as an oppressive monolith of history that doesn’t allow real life any space to breathe. History as catastrophe, as the possibility of almost total annihilation or, in fact, total annihilation. History as a refuge. History as hope. History as context. History as fate in both the good and bad sense. I sometimes get the feeling that Polish history, and the agonizing struggle that Polish artists, theologians, political thinkers, have with their own history, that all of this is a kind of special laboratory in one corner of the cauldron of Modernity.



One of the things you tend to do, Josh, is to pose the central problem of Modernity as a struggle between reactionary nostalgia on the one side and, I don't know, the predations of commercial capitalism on the other. This is a real problem, of course. But how does this thing "history" fit into that story? This thing "history" which is both utterly real and completely perspectival at the same time. This thing that, it turns out, can be very close to cancelled, as Poland discovered in the incredible traumas it endured for most of the 20th century. What actually is Modernity's relationship with history? I mean, this is an absurd question, since there is neither such a thing as Modernity and also no such thing as history. So, two things that don't exist combine to create nothing. On the other hand, there is a problem here, even if it threatens to be so abstract and over-generalized as to dissolve into a wisp. One of the things that I've noticed you doing, sometimes, is to present the past of pre-modernity, whenever that is exactly, as a place that can be more or less described as without plumbing or antibiotics, thereby rendering whatever else it has to offer moot. Old school conservatives, by contrast, render the past as that place where everything made sense, in contrast to the present. Both of these approaches are a way of avoiding the problem, I would say, of real history, which is a messy, demanding, real thing. The weirdness of real history makes false oppositions like Modern versus Anti-Modern collapse into the false antinomies that they always were.

As just a tiny aside here I keep getting pulled back, in recent years, to Bruno Latour's book *We Have Never Been Modern*. And now I get to throw a block of quoted text at you!

'in potencia' the modern world is a total and irreversible invention that breaks with the past, just as 'in potencia' the French or Bolshevik Revolutions were midwives at the birth of a new world. Seen as networks, however, the modern world, like revolutions, permits scarcely anything more than small extensions of practices, slight accelerations in the circulation of knowledge, a tiny extension of societies, minis-

culc increases in the number of actors, small modifications of old beliefs. When we see them as networks, Western innovations remain recognizable and important, but they no longer suffice as the stuff of saga, a vast saga of radical rupture, fatal destiny, irreversible good or bad fortune.

The antimoderns, like the postmoderns, have accepted their adversaries' playing field. Another field—much broader, much less polemical—has opened up before us: the field of nonmodern worlds. It is the Middle Kingdom, as vast as China and as little known.

I guess I am suggesting that *Dekalog* 8, in particular, situates Poland and Polish history as occupying a strange space in the story of Western Modernity, so strange that the normal oppositions don't quite apply. Because Poland never quite fit into the standard story of Western modern history, because it got smashed and smooshed and absorbed in early state formation and then clung to some counter history in its long suffering commitment to the Catholic Church, because it got kicked out of one track of history and into another by the Third Reich and then the Soviet Empire, because it is a place fiercely holding onto several versions of itself, none of which quite hold together and all of which challenge the straightforward history of Modernity, because of all these things the problem of being Polish becomes a big problem for what we mean by "modern" at all. And this also I think is a big part of what we are being shown in *Dekalog* 8.

now take it away professor!

morgan

July 17, 2020, 2:04 PM

Dear Morgan,

Your good humor is a welcome tonic. And your intervention about Polish history arrives right on time, both in terms of our exchange of letters and the grim political news this week from Poland about the reelection of Duda, the leader who signed the law forbidding accusations that the “Polish nation” was “responsible or complicit in the nazi crimes.” Which brings us right back to *Dekalog* 8. Kieślowski, had he released the episode today, probably would not have been prosecuted even under the original wording of the law, it would seem, since exceptions were made for artists and scientists. This was an odd loophole, however, one that seems inadvertently revealing of anxiety in officialdom about the slippage and evasion in the law itself concerning individual, collective, and national identity and responsibility. Now the law has been decriminalized, yet remains designed to cause a chilling effect. I’m not convinced that Kieślowski would have found more favor broadcasting *Dekalog* 8 today than under communism in the late 1980s. We’re going backwards.

One might ask how the Shoah, specifically as it unfolded in Poland, is to be treated in a work of art. Few would deny that the extermination sites in Treblinka and Sobibor, where the assembly line of nazi mass murder reached its ultimate nightmare, involved complicity that cannot exclude or be limited to one nation or people. One can choose to live in a state of disavowal, as in the vision of this Polish law. Another path available is the one Kieślowski offers his characters in this episode. In Jewish terms that would be recognized by Elżbieta, and surely by Zofia as well, this approach could be termed *tikkun olam*, the “repair of the world” associated with the idea that individuals are responsible for the betterment of the world, not just their own small sphere of daily life.

There's something built into that phrase that can mean the fixing of the world, or, alternatively, the establishment of a world, one that bends toward the good. (In religious terms, the establishment of a world that is the Kingdom of God.) But how can such events as those that transpired in Poland in the 1940s ever be repaired, and is this even a meaningful question, or a question that is permitted to be posed at all? And who has the right (or the responsibility) to ask it? Obviously, these crimes cannot ever be repaired, and, yet, equally obviously, we must continue with the work of repair. I'm using "we" language here deliberately, despite some trepidation, simply to indicate my own view that the story of Elzbieta and Zofia resonates across local, national, and global boundaries, suggesting our universal complicity. We are all attempting, as James Joyce wrote in a different context, the impossible, necessary, modern, and eternal task of awakening from the nightmare of history. I think this remains true, by the way, whether one is inclined towards Hansen's posture of viewing modernity as radical rupture, or Latour's idea of networked continuity in historical processes.

I might invoke Benjamin's well-known 1940 passage about the "angel of history" here:

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

This delicately balanced tension between past and future, remembrance and what Benjamin later calls the "narrow gate" to

some more humane alternative, seems to lie somewhere near the heart of *Dekalog* 8. What's clear is that we cannot go back, that those who claim that we can go back are lying to us, and that those who think that the future will be markedly different and better are also almost certainly lying to us. What other alternatives remain open?

By sharing their memories of their bleakest hours in 1943 (which might also be Poland's, Europe's, the world's, modernity's, or history's bleakest hours), Elżbieta and Zofia somehow find that narrow gate. It's a miracle, almost. After their initial discussion at the university, Elżbieta and Zofia spend the rest of the day and the night and the next day getting to know each other more deeply. What takes most of the rest of the episode to unfold is the revelation that Zofia did, in fact, have a different motive for turning away Elżbieta as a child during the war. That motive was that the man who had brought her to her house was suspected of being a Gestapo informant.

The discussion of their story in the classroom, which the professor afterwards dismisses as "superficially Catholic reasoning," has given way to a very different, far more complicated ethical hell. The real choice in that historical moment — as opposed to the choices presented in the hypothetical dilemma four decades later — was not a choice about an abstract notion of bearing false witness, after all, at least not in the sense intended in the classroom discussion. Instead it was a choice about betraying an entire network of the resistance to a man she thought was an informer. This is a true abyss. If the man who brought her the child really was an informer, then, of course, had the couple taken her in, neither the child nor they would have been saved, and the resistance would have been compromised as well in the process. Nobody would have been spared.

And these complications only deepen further as new aspects of the real story emerge throughout the episode. This is true to Kiesłowski's humanist vision of his characters as people who be-

come more and more complex and ambiguous the more one learns about them. As it happens, the man who brought the child to the couple was *not* a nazi stooge. He himself, in other words, was the victim of false witness. The classroom dynamic has been reversed — one takeaway from *Dekalog* 8 might be this: Get out of academia! Zofia was not the overly zealous *enforcer* of the Eighth Commandment after all. She was a *violator* of it, having believed the lie.

And, as Zofia makes clear later on in the episode, even if this man had been an informer, she has come to feel over the years, it was *still* wrong to turn away the child. This is tricky territory, though. Her reasoning since the war has shifted. During the war, her ethical hell involved the strong probability of causing a child's death in order to protect a larger group dedicated to toppling nazi tyranny. After the war, Zofia changes her mind. Now, she believes that her ethical duty to the child was paramount. This is somewhat confusing, however, insofar as she did not know whether or not the man was an informant, and, therefore, she did not truly know what her choice actually entailed. She should have rolled the dice, she seems to imply. Would that have been wise? Would it have saved the child?

All this might suggest a more general point of view that the sanctity of individual life might outweigh collective political solidarity. Alternatively, it might involve a retrospective historical claim that, since the Polish resistance did not ultimately succeed in overthrowing the nazi occupation on its own, its seemingly paramount value over all other concerns *during the war* might be questioned *in light of the subsequent outcomes*. This is actually a deeply disturbing idea that the episode does not explore in much depth. Perhaps, however, there is an even more basic assertion here being made, that the life of a child is always more important than the life or even lives of those who have had their chance to live and who are already prepared to die for their cause in any event, regardless of history or politics writ large, even as they related to World War II. This is uncom-

fortable at best. “I left you all alone,” Zofia tells Elżbieta. “I sent you... to almost certain death. And I knew what I was doing.” But “there’s no cause that could be more important than the life of a child.” This is obviously not true, and yet it is also obviously true. Means and ends? Ethical hell.

Elżbieta’s role in the episode, and the role of faith in her life, adds additional layers of nuance to this picture. Elżbieta, Zofia says, has “lived with that certainty for 40 years.” This “certainty,” presumably, is a (false?) certainty about Zofia’s character, the state of her soul, one might say. Through all these decades, Elżbieta has, somehow, not lost her faith, either in God or, more remarkably, in Zofia. How is this impossibility made possible?

The answer here is shocking, and twofold. First, Elżbieta has become a follower of Zofia’s work as a philosopher and writer. She had made it her business to translate Zofia’s work for English audiences, and, as we discover, she actually has met Zofia before as an adult, in New York, at an academic conference, and, at that time, drove her around the city. (She could not bring herself to confess her true identity at that time.) She has also studied Zofia’s biography and learned that, despite having turned her away in 1943, Zofia went on to save many other Jews during the war. She has investigated Zofia’s “case file,” seeking understanding rather than revenge. It’s her faith that allows this miracle of compassion to occur. Secular calculation or modern reason cannot bring human beings to such heights of humane wisdom, the film suggests. Prior to her visit to Warsaw, Elżbieta could not have known that there was another explanation for Zofia’s actions that fateful night in 1943, involving the potential presence of the Gestapo informant. But her faith allows her to keep open the possibility in her heart and mind that there might be — must be — was — is — another explanation. This is what allows Elżbieta to seek out Zofia from a perspective that does not automatically assume that Zofia is her enemy.

I can think of no better cinematic depiction of the inherent value of faith, can you? Kieślowski offers Elżbieta as one of the moral pinnacles of his films, and as a potential model, perhaps, for the artist's notion of what a modern form of heroism might look like. This is also, in a very real sense, a theory of narrative cinema that departs from the childish emphasis placed on suspense, sensation, and Manichean moralism by commercial cinema, and that provides a grown-up "Chekhovian" transition to another way of compelling the audience's attention. This transpires primarily through Kieślowski's depiction of such a character as Elżbieta, one who seeks and searches for what she does not know, who locates human mysteries without solutions, and who refuses to give up on people.

It's always dangerous to view characters as stand-ins for artists, but perhaps Elżbieta is the kind of person Kieślowski admires most, rather than someone who most accurately reflects his view of himself. (I think I was wrong about that!) She is, perhaps, among the least lost of all the lost souls whose lives we've seen dramatized so far. As I've indicated, however, I do not think that Kieślowski thinks that he is like Elżbieta after all, and this bears repeating. I feel it's more in tune with Kieślowskian sensibilities to suggest that the character of Elżbieta (like Julie [Binoche] in *Blue* and the Irène Jacob characters in *The Double Life of Veronique* and *Red*), gathers together and romanticizes the filmmaker's ideals of what might be most good in people. What coheres here in Kieślowski's films, among other things, is a remarkable set of modern heroines whose heroism involves the capacity to love.

Zofia is another kind of figure altogether, an older and wiser person, the flawed and contorted person. Is this, then, Kieślowski? I think the analogy is tempting (the answer might be "yes"), but unnecessary. Again like Chekhov in this regard, Kieślowski is all of these people and none of them. Zofia adheres to a kind of personal, private faith, regarding which she, the writer and lecturer, seems virtually incapacitated to describe. This feels honest



and true to your own concerns, by the way, about expressing your mysticism in words that inevitably feel inadequate, feeble, or broken.

Zofia believes in something: “Goodness. It exists. I believe it’s there in every human being.” She knows that the night in 1943 did not bring out the goodness in her. But was that self-knowledge helpful to her in changing her ways and determining to continue her work in the resistance to nazism and saving Jews from the Holocaust? Elżbieta presses Zofia to explain how one decides who is good, or whether it is even true that goodness resides in all of us. “And who’s the judge of that?” Elżbieta asks, requiring Zofia to make a statement about this faith she is so reluctant to discuss openly.

Zofia answers that question in this remarkable exchange:

“The one who lives inside of each one of us.”

“I’ve never read anything in your works about God.”

“I don’t attend church. I don’t use the word ‘God.’ But one can believe without having to use words.”

People can set God “aside,” Zofia continues. “And what takes his place?” Elżbieta asks. “Here, on Earth, solitude,” Zofia replies, “And there— Try and think it through. If there is nothing, if there really is nothing... in that case—” Elżbieta completes this unspoken thought (one which has several branches or possible conclusions): “Yes.”

Here, in these ellipses, the *Dekalog* comes very near the heart of the matter we’ve been discussing all along in our letters. “If there is nothing, if there really is nothing...” Then what? (And, conversely, if there is “something”? What then?) Zofia, again like the doctor character in *Dekalog 2*, is almost superstitious, one might say, about not discussing her faith. This refusal to speak is itself intriguing. As for Elżbieta, Kieślowski’s exemplar of faith is syncretic, blending Jewish and Christian symbols on

her necklace, as I mentioned before. What this mutual accord between Elżbieta and Zofia, their shared approach to religion (their “yes”), offers, in their antidotes to rigid thinking about ethics, might be difficult to describe, but it is also indispensable for keeping a humane outlook, especially when the world turns nightmarish.

But this film is not through with us. One final drama remains to be explored, and, for me, it is the most astonishing encounter of them all. Having offered her the spare room (vacated, as it happens, by a child on bad terms with her mother), the next day Zofia brings Elżbieta to that little tailor’s shop across the river in Warsaw, so that she can meet the person or people who actually *did* save her life during the war.

What Elżbieta finds there stuns her. At first, the tailor (Tadeusz Łomnicki) seems not to know her, or perhaps pretends not to know her. When she reminds him of his courageous act from the war years, he refuses to discuss it. Instead, he offers to make her a dress. “I don’t want to talk about what happened during the war,” he says. “I don’t want to talk about what happened after the war. I don’t want to talk about now.”

Elżbieta is taken aback. She tries another sortie, and is rebuffed:

“You were going to hide me. I wanted to thank you.”

“Do you have your own material?”

You really won’t talk to me?”

“Really.”

“What a strange country.”

Then our hearts break anew as we watch the tailor watching Elżbieta fondly greet Zofia on the sidewalk outside his shop. Zofia has decided to avoid the whole encounter. Presumably this is because she’s never been on good terms with this man who knows her as the woman who turned away the child, or as the person who falsely believed he was a nazi collaborator. His

knowledge of her, in any event, is of the hypocritical wartime coward, who transformed herself into a comfortable professor with a checkered past, one who did wrong during the occupation and yet clearly thrived under communism afterwards, while he suffered invisibly all the while. This is crushing. Why are some chosen and others discarded? Divinity, if it is there, invokes its right to remain silent about the abyss of history.

Elżbieta herself could have just as easily taken the same view of Zofia as the tailor, and with very good reasons. We witness an extraordinary moment of anticlimax here, among the most profound in the cinema, in my view. How much is implied here about the potential for denial and the potential for healing after historical trauma? The tailor cannot join in this healing process, not because he is a bad person, but because he is too traumatized to speak. He is unable to enter fully into an encounter with the past. This is understandable, and even more so when we begin to imagine various reasons why he not only doesn't want to talk about the war, but also doesn't want to talk about what happened after the war, under communism. Or "now."

Zofia, despite having played such a part in Elżbieta's personal history, does have the potential to change, grow, and connect with the person she wronged. She wishes to understand and to be understood. That, in turn, requires conversation and confrontation (both with others and oneself). But these are the very things that the most morally upright person in this story—the tailor—cannot indulge or afford. (Speaking of those who fix or mend the world, he must of necessity be a tailor.) Zofia and Elżbieta have an affinity that forms a prelude to potential forgiveness and possible friendship. The tailor, in his apparent absolute goodness, is perhaps too remote, or his heart is frozen over too deeply with layers of pain. Gender, here, again, may play a role, I'm not sure. The women might become close, or closer, while the tailor has shut himself off. Elżbieta understands that the best she can do is buy the dress from the tailor and bring

a little bit of money to his shop. He cannot even afford new magazines from which to create fashionable clothes for his patrons.

This whole predicament is deeply shocking and it feels as if Kieślowski has done the impossible by rendering it true to life. As the philosophers say, what else is worth forgiving except the unforgivable?

For me, this ending of *Dekalog* 8 is the place where Kieślowski attains the goal of his series. This is also the episode where some of the dialogue seems to reflect the concerns not only of this individual drama and this single episode, but also of the entire series and the filmmaker's stance towards his own creation. He also allows his characters to speak in ways that seem to apply to their own situation as well as to the series of interconnected stories the viewer has been watching all along. The manner in which the stories of *Dekalog* intersect is one that provides new adventures for the viewer on each subsequent viewing of the series. Here, for example, we glimpse those German Zeppelin stamps that will help form the philately theme of *Dekalog* 10 and bookend the series.

Meanwhile, that eternal apartment block which we've inhabited for so long that it has entered into our lives and dreams is described here as an "interesting building." Zofia shows all the cards when she comments, about her neighbors, "Everyone has a story to tell...' and so on...." Indeed.

Don't you think that this notion of interconnectivity provides more depth or intrigue to the episode you criticized earlier, *Dekalog* 9? Or is it still bothering you?

Notes from your friend JMT

July 29, 2020, 11:07 AM

Dear Josh,

The following thoughts may seem to be going off on a bit of a tangent. But hopefully you'll see that there is some point to them. Basically, I want to muss up some of the connections you've tried to create here, not out of any kind of maliciousness or hostility to what you are saying. But out of a feeling that a much stranger, a much less contemporary sense of time and history and cosmos comes from some of the texts you are citing, especially in terms of the *tikkun olam* stuff and in Benjamin's oft-cited, but, I think, rarely understood *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

It is actually pretty strange and kind of eerie that you brought up *tikkun olam* since just before I read this latest message from you I was (I am not making this up) having a conversation with my dear friend Rafe Neis (who you met and became rather fast friends with during your visit to Detroit last year) about *tikkun olam* and how the concept tends to get used in contemporary Judaism and amongst those who would relate it to social justice issues. Rafe is an actual scholar on these issues and can explain the whole thing much better than I can. But suffice it to say that 1960s progressive Judaism did something of a number on the concept of *tikkun olam* as it actually exists in the Mishnah, where it is a pretty mundane concept, and then what later happens to it among the Kabbalists. The main point here for our purposes is that the Kabbalistic notion of *tikkun olam* doesn't maybe fit so well into the idea that we "bend" history in this or that direction, which is a notion that fits well with modern ideas of history as something that goes this way or that. But from a Kabbalistic standpoint, history is just history. It is either in accord with the divine or not. The more you act in accordance with the divine will, the better, but this happens, in a sense, out-

side of history. When *tikkun olam* happens it's like bits of actual history are being lifted up into the divine. This happens in leaps and jumps and lightning flashes. It is not a process whereby history as a whole is going in this direction or that.

And that's why there are all these strange ideas (strange for someone raised within the basic sense of history as it exists in Western secular Modernity) in Benjamin's *Theses*. Benjamin says, for instance, that "The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again." He loves words like "flashes" and "instants" and "leaps" and "jumps." That's because he isn't interested in an idea of history as something that has a trajectory. The messianic potential embedded within history is always the possibility that history can be broken open, exploded, leapt outside of. Hope is not to be found in history in the sense of where it is going. Benjamin has no interest in the idea that the modern era is an "improvement" upon past eras or any such notion. But each moment in history is, nevertheless, imbued with special possibilities. Each moment in history can be the sudden realization of the radically new and the completely redeemed. Each moment in history is a "state of emergency." "History," Benjamin writes, "is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now." This has nothing to do with the idea of fighting the good fight over time, making the world better generation by generation, the continuity of history over time. None of that. It is, instead, the idea that history is a sort of metaphysically inert thing, a piling up of a continuous disaster, as he puts it, that does not have the means or the content to create its own meaning. There is no point or purpose or direction to history when we think of it on history's terms. It is simply a shit show. What is interesting to Benjamin is that embedded within this shit show are shards of redemption, little time bombs that have the potential to go off at any moment.

Okay, fine, I've said enough about this. I wonder, though, if the tailor at the end of *Dekalog* 8 can't be seen in this Benjaminian light. He is the bit of history that does not fit. He is a troublesome spot of discontinuity. He is the sign of something wrong, an unredeemed leftover. As such, he is also the sign of the possibility of redemption, again, not as something we work toward in a conscious process of slowly fixing history. No, he is the shard. This shard has the possibility of blowing up at any moment and therefore blowing a hole in the otherwise smooth story of continuity that human history likes to pretend is the case. Poland itself is kind of like the tailor, as I was suggesting before. Poland is the piece that does not fit, the historical loser. And Benjamin demands that historical materialists (i.e., secret theologians) be the ones to turn their backs on the historical victors, to deny that history has "accomplished" anything and to throw their weight in with the losers. That's why we must approach history always with the great burden of sadness. Benjamin quotes Flaubert. "Few will be able to guess how sad one had to be in order to resuscitate Carthage." Carthage, in this sense, has more to teach us than Rome. Or, from the perspective of Kieślowski, Poland has more to teach us than America. The very fact that Poland has such a shitty history is the very reason that it is so pregnant with messianic potential. You don't look to a nation's achievements to find its messianic potential, you look to its failures. Could that be what the culmination of *Dekalog* 8 is showing us?

As for *Dekalog* 9, I think my interest always flags in this one because the drama between the impotent doctor and his wife feels a bit contrived and overblown to me. I just don't really respond to the main plot line. I am intrigued by the opera singer, though. I think her name is Ola. She has to have a heart operation in order to keep singing but is struggling with whether to do it. In some sense, of course, she is Weronika from the *Double Life of Veronique*. I don't know, there is something profound here that also has to do with the question of messianic time and all the Benjamin stuff I've just been talking about. I'm still thinking it

through. Maybe you wanna get it going and I'll see if I can sort out any of my hunches in the meantime.

warmly,

morgan



July 31, 2020, 12:50 PM

Dear Morgan,

Yes, contemporary politics in Poland, a subject on which I'm certainly no expert, would seem to bolster your claim that no progress is guaranteed by history, whether we call ourselves modern, postmodern, nonmodern, or something else entirely. The attempt to repair the shattered world cannot be warranted by the course of events alone. Yet the breakthrough made by Elżbieta and Zofia in *Dekalog* 8 cannot be limited to a purely individual outcome. This story has implications for collective experience on some level, I am convinced, but, I agree, this is not a narrative of historical progress. It's a flash and a jump, as you suggest. The past is not just history. The past has a future. The vision of *tikkun olam*, if we consider Rafe's helpful intervention, does not bend history in the right direction. That's way too grandiose and also way too easy. (That said, I don't see any reason why Elżbieta wouldn't be exactly the right age of person to subscribe to the "new" understanding of *tikkun olam* as a call to social justice in the 1960s and beyond, a hermeneutic novelty that itself is by now decades old!)

Anyway, I think you are spot on, also, in identifying the tailor character as a figure who reveals how limited that breakthrough is between the two women. If this breakthrough is something more than an instant, it's still not one that can be shared even between these three people whose lives converged one night in 1943. And, if not between these three, then who? You're right — it's the tailor who is more of a synecdoche for Polish national experience, whereas the outcome of the story of Elżbieta and Zofia represents an ideal that rarely if ever comes to pass. Their truth and reconciliation process has something of the flavor of an impossibility that nevertheless happens.

I'm persuaded by Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" (in his book of the same name) as a reasonable diagnosis

of an ongoing condition of ceaseless change, under the regime of instrumental rationality, and consumerist perceptions of ourselves, and our relationships, as being liable to extreme alterations by technology and mass culture. One thing I find heartening about our shared excursions here, into the little corner of the culture where religion and cinema overlap, is that this is a place from which society's "ostensibly unquestionable premises of our way of life" (as Bauman puts it in another book, about globalization) can be questioned and subjected to stringent critique or narrative investigation. (It may be worth mentioning in passing, apropos of *Dekalog* 8, that Bauman lost his teaching post in Warsaw under pressure from the communist authorities, speaking of Polish professors.)

What's remarkable is that Kieślowski's films continue to speak to "the way we live now" so many years after his untimely death. Kieślowski's films gesture ahead of their time towards this post-secular critique of modern disenchantment that we've been pursuing in these letters, as well as offering ways towards a sensibility that was deeply alienating to the competing ideologies of the late 20th century. These aspects of his work allow us, retrospectively, to be suspicious of the triumphalist American rhetoric of "the end of history" surrounding the fall of the USSR, but without falling into *Ostalgie* for life under communism, whose purported rationality and instrumental exploitation turned out to be so brutal.

On the other hand, I can appreciate the virtue of viewing Kieślowski as nonmodern, since, clearly, the entire drift of the *Dekalog* tends towards the implication that the scriptures have some real purchase on the present, an idea which suggests that modernity's claim to be radically different from life in the past might be overblown. Kieślowski's complexity and ambiguity — specifically, his imposition of an ancient storytelling structure on tales of "contemporary" life that still feel relevant over thirty years on — allow for this double-lensed impression of his work. The fact that our viewpoints don't fully merge and yet

both feel true to the work is not only fascinating but also a sign of Kiesłowski's durability, I think.

It's Elżbieta's syncretism that makes her contemporary (a "modern" person in the commonly understood sense of the word who chooses her own philosophical stance). But it is her willingness to be guided by her faith that makes her nonmodern in the best possible sense. We don't know the backstory of her jewelry mixing Jewish and Christian symbols, but that's the kind of thing that marks her as having spent her life in the postwar West. Yet she's also the character who takes the Eighth Commandment most seriously and allows the Law to shape her life. By refusing absolutely to bear false witness, she also refuses to evaluate Zofia until she has all the evidence she is able to gather. She is the truest witness involved with Zofia's "trial" in *Dekalog* 8.

Modernity is not the thing that provides Elżbieta with hope, her faith does, yet that faith could be viewed as quintessentially modern, or, alternatively, as critically nonmodern. Her faith is both pleasingly obsolete (involving Elżbieta's "irrational" reliance on prayer and forgiveness as well as her confidence in the Commandments as a coherent whole) and intriguingly newfangled (in its post-1960s combination of religions, invoking what is elsewhere called a "private" — or modern? — ! — God). Modernity, assuming that it exists, operates here not as something to promote or condemn but simply as the condition in which these characters exist in late 1980s Poland. They are dealing with the aftermath of modernity's worst horrors — the industrial-scale genocide in the death camps — and the incipient collapse of the modern edifice of the Iron Curtain as an outgrowth of the failed revolution and botched global empire of the USSR. The contemporary political scene in Poland today, in which nostalgic traditionalism is rotting the country's chances from the head down, provides a case study in how reactionaries instill tyranny by pretending that modernity can be overcome by a return to what they describe as religious values.

But of course another sort of faith is possible. This faith of Elżbieta's is redolent both of our postsecular era and of ancient texts, which, of course, means that it is thoroughly contemporary. I think it might be viewed as a little bit New Age, in the more positive sense. It's detached from any clearly defined congregation or public worship. Yet its combination of Jewish and Christian symbols also seems true to the spirit of Early Christianity (before the establishment of the Church), and to the teachings of Jesus (in particular, to the Great Commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself"). Neighbors — that's what the *Dekalog* is all about, the person who is hidden away in the next room suffering! What makes for a neighbor and for hospitality, in the deepest possible sense, becomes an insistent theme of the series, in general, and of the incidents from 1943 described by the characters in *Dekalog* 8, in particular. And this Great Commandment is redolent of a specific moment in history when Jewish thinkers like Jesus, Paul, James, and Jude were reconsidering the meaning of the Law according to the Prophecies. In fact, because *Dekalog* 8 invokes the Shoah, I think it's important to underline something. The false claim often made in Christian anti-Semitic rhetoric, that Judaism is "legalistic" and rule-following, has been undermined in contemporary scholarship on the New Testament. The earliest Christians were Jews, of course, and held to Jewish philosophy, with the Great Commandment repeatedly emphasized by Jesus not as a violation of the Decalogue but its fulfillment. Maybe Kiesłowski wishes to portray Elżbieta as being truer to Jesus than some of the Catholics of 1943 by recovering the Jewish roots of the Great Commandment.

Elżbieta's combination of religious symbols accords well with her prayerful compassion and her deep well of forgiveness for Zofia. The symbols on her necklace don't contradict one another, or monotheism, if one takes Early Christianity seriously as a Jewish movement. Even if many of these texts lead the believer away from the doctrine of the Trinity or the damning sentence about *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* — no salvation outside of the Church — they remain true to the spirit of much in the New

Testament. The Letter of James, for example, despised by Luther as a “letter of straw” in part because it recovers the historical sensibility of “Jewish Christianity” in the early days following the death of Jesus, announces that true religion is “to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (1:27). The idea here, to keep on keeping on with good works that follow the Decalogue as one answer to how to live in the wake of Jesus’s death, chimes with Elżbieta’s distress in 1943 as a child in need of protection from a polluted world.

This is not the place to enter very deeply into the history of the Catholic Church, generally, or the Polish Catholic Church, specifically, during the Shoah. It is sufficient, I think, to note the historical accuracy in *Dekalog* 8 regarding the role of baptismal certificates that converted Jews to Christians before they were helped to hide from the nazis. On one hand, these certificates were deemed necessary by Catholic nuns, monks, and priests, all of whom risked death to save lives, giving their work a fig leaf of cover under which to operate. On the other hand, the certificates meant that survival depended on no longer being regarded as a *Jewish* person. Therefore they raise a question as to whether a Jewish person was “worth saving” in the eyes of Catholics because they were a person, or because they had converted and were “no longer Jewish.” In some sense personhood and hospitality became symbolically connected. “Thy neighbor,” then, is not a neighbor to be recognized with love until they are baptized?

From here there is a line of influence to be drawn all the way forward to the present-day rhetoric of the Duda government, with its convoluted new laws freezing open discussion of Polish complicity in the Shoah. The ascription of threats to the nation by “alien” forces (then, Jews, now, LGBTIQ+ persons) sounds like an echo of Polish Cardinal August Hlond’s old slander that “Polish Jews could not be assimilated into the country’s life, and that at worst, they poisoned it.” This is not a far cry from the rheto-

ric concerning the bogus threat posed by George Soros and the Open Society foundation on the part of Hungary's Viktor Orbán, or the anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant elements within the far-right here in the USA. And the obsessional nature of this focus on imaginary external threats, in each of these cases, is based on a traditionalist call to reject modern liberal secularism and to advocate for a return to "values." But this picture is complicated by the fact that, as Karen Armstrong's book *The Battle for God* (2000) points out, contemporary fundamentalism is itself a thoroughly modern outgrowth of pseudo-scientific claims for religion based on ways of reading holy texts that are, in fact, far from traditional.

Elżbieta — and Kiesłowski — remind us, if a reminder is needed, that another option is always possible. That is, very simply, to take religion seriously, unlike so many who loudly proclaim to be religious and believe that they will be saved by a God they insult daily by their words and actions. This alternative way of thinking through religion might involve some admittedly unorthodox versions of faith — or even various forms of syncretism, heresy, or blasphemy, perhaps including combinations of religions or private gods of whom it is better not to speak.

What this doesn't entail, for Kiesłowski, however, is materialism. As I've mentioned previously, it is possible to position Kiesłowski's films at a very specific historical cusp delicately balancing between the influences of a number of variously conflicting regimes, including Polish communism and Catholicism, the empire of America and its movie and television culture, and the emerging dimensions of a European Union into which Poland fits very awkwardly at the best of times. Here, in this strange space that you rightly point out seems endemic to Poland, Kiesłowski developed his epic vision in the late 1980s and the early to mid-1990s. In doing so, he created an utterly astonishing series of films that, taken together, seem to challenge many of the assumptions of the Cold War and the post-Cold War Third Way, as well as the smug and misplaced confidence

of the seemingly triumphant secular culture of liberal pluralism *and* the fundamentalist vision of returning to tradition. All in a day's work, I guess.

In *The Double Life of Veronique*, Kieślowski specifically connects the fate of characters who live in an interstitial zone somewhere between France and Poland, invoking, as he does later in *White*, the sense of shared fate between these two countries, but also the yearning of Poland to be European, a love that, pointedly, is not returned or even acknowledged on some level. Here, as at many key moments in his films, Kieślowski's characters become aware of forces that exist beyond the ken of rationality, which cannot be explained, which are portrayed as real, and which have a status that seems to me to be most similar to the stance of folklore rather than any official conception of worship. I think this element in his work — whether one calls it spiritualist, spiritual, or religious — is one of the reasons why Kieślowski's films feel simultaneously timely and timeless, modern and nonmodern, contemporary and classic.

Your critical comments about *Dekalog* 9 seem fair enough to me. I agree with you that its minor characters are more interesting than its central ones. I suppose we could take comfort in the idea that Kieślowski has revealed himself to be merely human and leave it at that! But there's another sense in which the episode acts as a kind of transit hub or telephone exchange for many of the ideas and storylines that the filmmaker would pursue afterwards. This, I think, makes *Dekalog* 9 more than a filmmaker's notebook, and positions it instead as a kind of deep storage facility for the seeds that Kieślowski would use later to grow so many of his subsequent projects. (Have I mixed my metaphors sufficiently yet?) The episode becomes more and more interesting, I would argue, as one links it to other episodes in the *Dekalog* and to *The Double Life of Veronique* and *Three Colors*. So much so that I'm tempted to argue that *Dekalog* 9 presents us as viewers with the possibility of attempting to construct an ideal "film inside our heads" which comprises all of

Kieślowski's work in one unified picture. But this temptation should be resisted, since the attempt to combine these movies into one seamless whole is bound to fail.

Nevertheless, *Dekalog 9* is well-known to be a sort of gold mine from which Kieślowski draws a surprisingly large number of his characters, plot elements, themes, leitmotifs, and even some of the filmmaker's "stock company" of actors in his later films. As you mention, the singer with the heart condition, Ola (Jolanta Piętek-Górecka), becomes Weronika/Veronique in *The Double Life of Veronique*. The uncanny choral music that seems to "kill" Weronika is that of the fictional composer Van den Budenmayer, who has another fan and listener in Julie, the protagonist of *Blue*. On a more subtle level, *Dekalog 9*'s play with music and telephone surveillance might find echoes in the mentoring relationship between an older man and a younger woman in *Red*. The stresses caused by impotence in a marriage to a beautiful blonde, on the other hand, are reprised in *White* by the great actors Julie Delpy (as Dominique Vidal) and Zbigniew Zamachowski (playing Karol Karol). The latter also stars alongside Jerzy Stuhr (who is also wonderful as Jurek in *White*) in *Dekalog 10*. Such is the intricate and delicate knitting between *Dekalog 9* and the rest of the films Kieślowski made afterwards. The name of a friend in Krakow mentioned casually in *Dekalog 9*, Mikołaj, turns up again in *White*. This time around, Mikołaj is a more major character, played by Janusz Gajos (from *Dekalog 4*), who, like Roman (aka Romek, played by Piotr Machalica) in *Dekalog 9*, wishes to dispatch himself, but who, also like Roman/Romek, finds new reasons to live.

Kieślowski's world is interconnected not only thematically but also in a sort of quasi-Faulknerian sense in which new films act as outgrowths from previous ones and characters seem to overlap and merge. Except that these overlaps are not quite seamless, which causes various disruptions in our ability to combine them into some totality or cinematic *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It might be more accurate to suggest that Kieślowski's characters seem to



“double” and proliferate various “versions” of themselves from one production to the next. In one sense, the characters in the later films might be seen as having an uncanny relationship with their predecessors, continuing their symphony by adding new notes by another composer, so to speak, to use the central metaphor of Julie’s artistic method of finishing her dead husband’s composition in *Blue*. Somewhere near the center of these patterns, I would argue, is Van den Budenmayer. He’s well-known to Kieślowskians as the fictional 18th-century Dutch composer invented by the filmmaker and brought to life gloriously by the composer Zbigniew Preisner in the “excerpts” from Van den Budenmayer we hear presented diegetically in the *Dekalog*, *The Double Life of Veronique*, and *Three Colors*.

The singer Ola in *Dekalog* 9 and the singers Weronika/Veronique in *Double Life* both have heart conditions, although they have different names and are played by different actors. They are both the same and different from one another. Within *The Double Life of Veronique*, Irène Jacob, the actor who portrays the French Veronique, a music teacher who listens with rapt attention to Van den Budenmayer, also portrays the Polish Weronika, the singer who while dies performing Van den Budenmayer’s choral work. They, too, are both the same and different — both the characters and, arguably, the actor herself. But that difference is different, insofar as the situation has shifted and we’re now seeing the same actor playing a double role. Jacob’s return in *Red* presents a further unfolding of these complexities and doublings. Again she listens to Van den Budenmayer, as if she has never heard it before, or as if we had never seen her encountering this music in her previous roles. Like the flute’s notes that complete the song for the “reunification of Europe” being assembled in *Blue*, Jacob-as-Valentine joins the protagonists from these other films in the astonishing ending of *Red*. This finale, which also marks the end of Kieślowski’s filmmaking career, brings together the major characters from the trilogy and unifies their stories. In this way, all of these local tales, set in France,

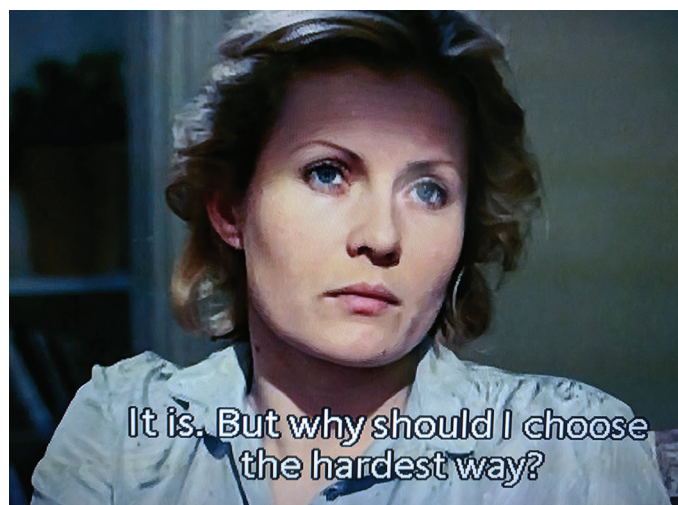
Switzerland, and Poland, form a European symphony that also includes the linked lives (and music) in *The Double Life of Veronique* and the tower blocks of Warsaw in *Dekalog*.

We would like to see an artist's work add up to some coherent whole, but this dream of one film can never be completed. It's a tantalizing illusion but also a necessary fiction. In a somewhat similar fashion, the episodes of the *Dekalog* add up to something larger than the sum of their parts, with their individual dramas building into an interconnected set of stories that also stands as a singular work of art. To quote the hilarious and self-referential line that culminates the tragicomedy portrayed in the last episode of the *Dekalog*, "It's a series!"

If nothing else, the melodrama of *Dekalog* 9 serves to avoid a potentially jarring transition in tone between the deeply tragic seriousness of *Dekalog* 8 and the exuberant outburst of jokes in *Dekalog* 10. It simply would not have worked to go from Episode 8 to Episode 10. Some insulation was required between these two rooms. Yet this interstitial material provides much of the wiring between Kieślowski's phases and projects as he moved westward from Warsaw to Paris and back again to the windswept heights of Lake Geneva and finally out to sea in the English Channel as it is depicted at the end of *Red*. We're left regretting that he never made a London film and a New York film and a Tokyo film and a Hong Kong film and a Delhi film and an Istanbul film and a Capetown film. But maybe it's better that things turned out this way after all. There are other films to be made and other stories, for other artists who are closer to these places, to tell. Yes, this series is better viewed as an invitation to explore one's own surroundings rather than as an attempt to center a false universalism in one location.

Notes from your friend JMT

*P.S. Two images here of Kieślowski's outcasts, juxtaposed so as to appear to speak to one another across time and films...*



August 3, 2020, 11:43 AM

Dear Josh,

Not to quibble, and I'll let this go in a second, but the Benjaminian claim is not that "no progress is guaranteed by history," but that progress has nothing to do with history at all even a little bit, nope, not even a smidgen. Nothing. Regress is also an irrelevant concept when dealing with history, by the way. Benjamin was working with a concept of history that has nothing to do with either a progressive or a conservative idea. Benjamin, in that text, is interested in revolution and in messianism. He's more or less convinced that the two go together, thus the "funny" story about the Turkish chess playing automaton. The automaton is likened to historical materialism. The reason that historical materialism (revolutionary Marxism) will win, according to Benjamin, is that it is secretly being guided by the theological dwarf hidden under the table. That's to say, 20th-century revolutionary politics was simply a way for the messianic moment to rip history open and allow access to the divine. Like it or not, that's what Benjamin was up to in his thinking and it is a point so baffling to many of the readers of Benjamin that they consistently twist themselves in knots trying to explain how he actually meant something else. But he didn't.

Okay, that's all I'll say on that. I mean, the potential impact of this thought is so huge that we could talk about just this together for the rest of our lives. But maybe that is also why we should just let it go.

And maybe, funnily, this has something to do with why *Dekalog* ends as it does. You've already said it, really. *Dekalog* 9 must exist, and must have its farcical moments, because *Dekalog* 10 must exist and *Dekalog* 10 must be essentially a comedy and it must be a comedy that verges on the ridiculous or the shaggy dog. (Interesting maybe that one of the key comedic elements in *Dekalog* 10 is that massive and somehow highly amusing dog.)

Turning *Dekalog* 10 into an almost goofy shaggy dog story was a brave thing for Kieślowski to do, I would say, especially since I don't get the feeling that he was a particularly funny guy. Not that there aren't genuine moments of humor in *White* and in other spots throughout *Dekalog* and in other things Kieślowski directed. He wasn't without humor. He could find the amusing moments and the little spots of the comedic. Still, he never actually directed a true comedy and taking *Dekalog* 10 on its own, as some kind of comedic statement in its own right, would be to say that obviously this is Kieślowski out of his element. *Dekalog* 10 only works, insofar as it works, in relation to the rest of the films of *Dekalog*.

I think it is great because the sense we could get from the entirety of *Dekalog* up to 10 is that life is essentially tragic. It has the essential structure of tragedy, which is basically the problem of the individual, the particular, in the face of the larger structures and forces against which the individual has no chance. The problem of the individual, in tragedy, is the problem of navigating this territory of "no chance." Either one is ground to dust in this confrontation or one learns to cancel one's own individuality, in a sense. One bows to the gods. One way or another, in tragedy, one bows to the inevitability of the gods. This is the greatness of tragedy, and the greatest tragedies are the ones that convey the relentlessness and lack of pity or sentimentality through which this inevitability has its way.

Comedy is not the opposite of this, but it is an interesting twist. Because in comedy, the inescapable logic of tragedy is subverted ever so slightly by the leaps and jumps, the illogical, the silly, the unexpected. Laughter is not really an answer to the unstoppable force of tragedy. That force will always exert itself. But laughter is a pause. It is a hesitation in the midst of the grind. Comedy always tries to slip a banana peel under the iron feet of the tragic progression. This will fail, of course, which is itself pretty funny. Comedy is always about failure and is always a tribute to the beauty of failure. In fact, most comedies fail be-

cause they don't have the stomach to see the ridiculous failure all the way through to the end. They try to snatch a victory at the last moment. That's when these pseudo-comedies become what comedy should never be, which is anti-tragedy. Comedy cannot defeat tragedy. That's the point. Tragedy is correct, in this sense. Tragedy is the true state of affairs. But comedy, in accepting the state of affairs that is tragic, in affirming, in a sense, the situation in which the individual will always lose, preserves and redeems the beauty of that losing proposition. Comedy is the acceptance of the situation of losing and a celebration of the process by which that inevitable losing plays itself out.

I would say that Kieślowski stays quite close to this sense of comedy in *Dekalog* 10. The two brothers are never going to come out on top. They are going to bumble and fight. They are going to turn against one another. They are going to make stupid decisions in their greed and in their attempts to make it rich from their father's stamp collection. They are going to miss the point that it was obsession around the stamps that turned their father into a selfish and small person in the first place. And they are going to be outmaneuvered by the professionals who have always been two steps ahead of them from the very beginning. This is also the position of the individual vis-à-vis fate. And yet, it is in the final failure and the ultimate losing that the two brothers are able finally to see one another again. This is the true joy of comedy. It is the joy of seeing the true face of the other in the moment of defeat. This does not forestall the defeat. But it does change it. It does create a tiny space within which life can happen.

If I can make a bit of a jump here, I have a friend who is an Episcopal priest. He always likes to say that Christianity is for losers. This is a hard point for most Christians to hold onto. Everybody wants to flip it around at the last moment. Everybody wants to pretend that being a Christian means that you're going to win in the end, somehow, by some trick of history or the afterlife. Everybody wants to slap a triumphant resurrection onto the story of the Cross. But what would it mean to see the figure of Christ

upon the Cross as one of the great moments of tragi-comedy? “Oh Shit,” Christ finally realizes, “this is where it all ends up.” That is a very funny moment, actually. That’s where Kieślowski wants to leave us, I think. We are presented with the full panoramic scope of the tragedy that is life. And then this tragedy is embraced, utterly and completely, in the only way that it can be embraced, with a laugh.

in hope and laughter,

morgan

August 6, 2020, 6:42 PM

Dear Morgan,

It's melancholy-inducing for me to see this project of ours winding down. So the idea of discussing these things for life on a porch somewhere (literal or metaphorical) sounds most heartening. I was just thinking of a whole series of serendipities involving Benjamin's "angel of history," which fittingly haunts our correspondence right now. While itself based on Klee's 1920 painting, this figure recurs in cinema as well, most obviously influencing Wim Wenders in *Wings of Desire*, itself a film with a curious relationship to European history. The release of *Wings of Desire* in 1987 predated the broadcast of the *Dekalog* and the fall of the Berlin Wall by only a couple of years. Artur Barciś, while wing-less, takes up a somewhat similar observation post in Kieślowski's series as Damiel (Bruno Ganz) does before his decision to become human in Wenders's film. And this angel spreads its wings across the Atlantic, appearing in Laurie Anderson's song "The Dream Before" on her album *Strange Angels*, from 1989. Anderson's song has a well-known lovely opening: "Hansel and Gretel are alive and well / And they're living in Berlin. / She is a cocktail waitress — he had a part in a Fassbinder film." I thought at first that might be a gesture to Wenders. But Anderson had been making wonderfully strange films all along, including "What You Mean We?" which aired on PBS in 1986, before the release of *Wings of Desire*, including a performance of "The Dream Before." (There's always a dream before. Anderson had been thinking of Benjamin and a poem by Howard Moss in *Harper's*, according to the film's credits. Klee, too, apparently used a print of a Cranach painting of Luther for mounting his own image, according to R.H. Quaytman, who created her own contemporary response.) "Can you imagine having wings?" one character asks in Anderson's short television film.

I realize that Benjamin was writing under duress and persecution in an historical moment with extreme pressure building



intolerably towards what must have seemed at the time like absolute and binary choices. There's something absurd, almost mad, in a way, about his ideas that cinema would turn out to be a liberating force, as you mentioned before, and that historical materialism could open up the realm of the religious, in the way you illuminate here. And yet... didn't Kieślowski and Anderson eventually make something like this happen by broadcasting *Dekalog* and "What You Mean We?" to the millions on Polish and American television? In that most unlikely of places, hiding in plain sight — the box — we witness the loss of aura and see the infinite reproducibility of images that placed all these angels inside every home. The altarpiece has been brought to you and requires no pilgrimage.

To take up *Dekalog* 8 again, very briefly, if I may, the breakthrough dramatized between Elżbieta and Zofia feels like it has something to do with history and something to do with religion, in the specific sense that it happens according to a vision of time not as *nunc fluens* but *nunc stans*. Their accord is an outburst of love, if not eternity, one might say, that does not and cannot alter the course of history "out there." They are kindred — adoptive family — neighbors in the sense commanded. History, in the larger political sense, is not Kieślowski's main concern here. The arc of his career veers away from politics. Yet, at the same time, his characters' movement towards friendship can be pinned with precision to a particular set of lives overlapping in certain places and times in the 20th century. That process of overlapping stories and interthreading fates, to some purpose that remains mysterious, seems to reside at the heart of the *Dekalog*, and of Kieślowski's films more generally, if viewed as an interconnected "series."

What you have to say about comedy gets right to the heart of things in *Dekalog* 10, since it raises the question about whether some divine force guides the warp and woof of this loom — or not. Dante's vision of "comedy" is "divine" in this very precise manner. There is a narrow path that leads up from purgatory

to heaven, a chance to find oneself when lost, and to redeem all the horror one has witnessed or lived through. For all the reasons you describe so well — and I especially appreciate the notion of Christianity for “the losers” — all this hard living must be comedy, in Dante’s sense, in the last analysis, if God exists, and if we keep the faith. Or maybe not? Yes, I suppose it’s also pretty funny, in an absurdist, existential sense, if nothing is there after all except accelerating galaxy clusters and stuff. If we play the man in light of the vastness of the cosmos, the joke’s on us. That seems apropos of Chaplin’s Little Tramp character as an archetypal cinematic “beautiful loser,” subject to the accursed randomness of secular buffeting winds.

In some ways, aren’t we talking about how wisdom allows us to reframe our suffering and tell a different story about “what fools these mortals be,” including ourselves? The same set of tragic events can be viewed, in retrospect, as survivable, like the joyous outburst experienced by Mikołaj in *White* after he pays someone to kill him but then casts away his suicidal depression when he realizes that he gets to live after all. This might be my favorite scene in all of Kiesłowski’s films, a parable of life as perfect as anything in Kafka, and I think it is characteristic of the general underrating of comedy that *White* is not considered the equal of the other films in *Three Colors*. Now, I show my cards. I am a believer in the religion of laughter.

Returning to the *Dekalog*, I think it’s worth noting that The Ninth and Tenth Commandments are closely linked together by the idea of covetousness, in the former case for spouses and in the latter case for possessions. These Commandments and the stories based on them in the series involve stealing or feeling one has been stolen from. It’s strange that they come at the end of the list of laws. Not an afterthought, however, but rather a summation of the whole business of who possesses what in some larger sense. Your notes have inspired me to wonder if *Dekalog* 9 and 10 act as mirror images of one another. The crushing failure and impotence that drives Roman to attempt suicide gets replayed

in some sense by the failure of the brothers to win at the stamp collecting game, with the difference that they are able to accept their defeat and powerlessness, and laugh in the face of the abyss rather than being drawn down into a state of despair.

Riffing on your comments, one might almost say that the brothers have decided between themselves what's happened to them. The loss of a fortune is not a tragedy, or rather that tragedy is not the end, not the final word, as you suggest. That is their story, and they are sticking to it. As you write (daringly) of the crucifixion, "This tragedy is embraced, utterly and completely, in the only way that it can be embraced, with a laugh." There's also something funny about the various apostles' initial refusals to believe in (or inability to recognize) the appearances of Christ after his death, and the whole rigmarole that's necessary to convince some of the disciples to believe. I keep thinking of that phrase misattributed to Tertullian, "I believe because it is absurd." Begone, all you New Atheists and reason-toting theologians, with your sad public debating points and clinically obtuse YouTube videos. Welcome back to Malick, von Trier, and Kieślowski.

One significant difference between the last two episodes of the *Dekalog* is that Kieślowski has moved from considerations based on romantic love to those of brotherly love. This is actually an interesting reversal of the normal pattern of classic literary genre storytelling, insofar as comedy generally involves thoughts of marriage, and tragedy often springs from sibling rivalry, at least in Shakespeare. In *Dekalog* 10, however, the rivalry and distance dissolves as the brothers share their burdens. Whereas in *Dekalog* 9, the *Tartuffe*-like play with hidden observers and sexual indiscretions and so forth plays as melodrama rather than as farce. So, in *Dekalog* 9 adultery is not considered through the typical male lens of philandering, while in *Dekalog* 10 a story of philately becomes one about the notion of *philadelphia*, some city of brotherly love.

We've really been talking all this time about love in its various forms — friendship, camaraderie, filial piety, brotherly affection, adoption, parenting, romance, eros, and religious *agapē*. All this time the law has been about love from the beginning, as in Jewish philosophy. While the Ninth Commandment about “thy neighbor’s wife” is under consideration in *Dekalog* 9, the episode might as easily have the same title as the feature film created from *Dekalog* 6, *A Short Film About Love*. And what is the *Dekalog* itself as a series except a Long Film about Love? Add in *Three Colors*, and it’s even longer....

Impotent Roman is useful to the singer Ola during her hospital stay, as she attempts to make a decision about whether or not to have surgery on her heart, an operation, however, that might negatively affect her singing career. Their friendship goes beyond the mechanistic sense of usefulness one would expect from a doctor-patient relationship, while also avoiding the exploitative use to which two disaffected people with time on their hands might put one another when thrown together after hours for a cigarette break in a movie. Instead, they form a bond based on their shared love of music. Roman is able to help, and to heal, precisely because he’s not at all interested in using the singer, but instead learns from her. His own sense of his own uselessness is also, therefore, totally misguided, because it is based on a false premise about sex being the sum of all fulfillment. But he doesn’t understand this clearly. Love and friendship have durable value, sex is unavoidable but volatile, important but liable to get twisted up in self-destructive impulses (of which we’ve seen plenty already in the series). Roman takes on the role of confessor and advisor to Ola, but he doesn’t offer her his advice about her surgery until he learns more about her background and motives — her story as a person.

Love and friendship are particularly useful when people aren’t using one another (which isn’t love anyway), that is, when they are “useless.” This also entails a resistance against turning people into things to be reified. What ultimately brings Roman

and his spouse, Hanka (Ewa Błaszczyk), back together involves their pledge to be honest to one another and not manipulate each other (her by lying, him by voyeuristically peeping on her sexual infidelities). People cannot be replaced, swapped out, or reduced to interchangeable parts. It's actually interesting from a narrative perspective that their rapprochement takes place over the telephone, not in the type of melodramatic hospital bed scene one might expect. (Kieślowski disallows such nuisances and insists on such nuances, even to the point of resisting drama altogether here.) "You're there," she tells him on the phone, approvingly, and assertively, indicating the depth of wonder she feels just at the mere fact of his existence. Isn't it amazing that the people we love not only continue to exist but also continue to love us? They go to sleep, wake up, and still love us. Or they don't. How mysterious!

There is only one Roman and one Hanka, they've found each other once again. They both are "there" in some ultimate sense. This love, and not just Roman's impotence, is also a part of what allows him the leeway to develop a non-exploitative friendship with a much younger woman, who, in turn, is able to bring consolation into his life in the form of beautiful music. Here *Dekalog 9* recasts its Commandment, traveling away from nonsense about "thy neighbor's wife" and towards the deeper waters involving property and possessions. The all-important distinction between what we want and what we have is outlined by Ola for Roman. She describes the difference between what her mother wants for her in life — I think the word used here is "everything" or "all" of it — versus her own personal and artistic ambitions. To illustrate her point, Ola holds up her fingers and squeezes them to represent how little she wants in comparison with what her mother wants for her. Yet she's obviously a brilliantly talented singer. "I have a voice," she notes, nonchalantly, but not immodestly. I think Kieślowski's ideal of what an artist might be is conveyed well in this line. Ola is the person who accepts that they have a voice but does not think of themselves as one of life's winners. This isn't about "success."

This scene counterpoints Roman's own despair at wanting what he thinks he cannot have, which is sex with his wife. But of course it's not the case that sex is off the menu for Roman and Hanka as a couple, it's just that sex won't involve what he considers its culmination, in mutual pleasure through penetration. Instead their sex, if it is to continue after the ending of this episode, will need to be different — he'll find out if and how he can please her. The point is that she is less concerned with penetrative sex than he is (yet another example among many other subtle gestures towards greater gender equality in Kieślowski's films, I'd like to think). What Roman thinks Hanka thinks she wants is not quite the same as what she wants. When she tries to seduce him in bed early in the episode, she's aware of his condition. It's possible that she's risking offending him by thinking she can cajole him into penetrative sex. But perhaps she already understands what he does not yet grasp, which is that other pleasures remain for them, and that their love is not lost or reducible. Roman needs to accept himself, since Hanka has already done so. This is beautiful. (And here, also, is another arrow shot into the "superficially Catholic" doctrine about the authentic purpose of sex being penetrative and related to procreation. It's emphasized in the film that Roman and Hanka have deliberately decided not to have a child, and while this induces regret on their part, they realize that they can now adopt. Love continues in myriad forms and directions.) This is what drama can do when it frees itself from the conventional and generic ideas of Hollywood plotting and Los Angeles versions of plausible stories about relatable characters and so forth. Maybe we have underestimated this episode?

My mind keeps circling back to Kieślowski's self-definition as "somebody who doesn't know, somebody who's searching." We must nevertheless love one another, and we do seem to possess a goodness that is difficult to eradicate entirely. It's our encounters with death and loss, and our struggles to form loving bonds, that bring out this capacity for good. I love how *Dekalog* 10 recapitulates all of these ideas, but conveys them in a comic tone

redolent of the absurdities of Polish life — or maybe just life in general. When we first meet Artur (Zbigniew Zamachowski) at the start of the episode, he's spewing satanic nonsense from his platform as a punk rock singer. The lyrics of his song are as hilariously ironic as the name of his band, City Death:

Kill! Kill! Kill and fornicate!  
 Fornicate and covet! All week long!  
 And on Sundays beat your father, mother and sister  
 Beat your juniors and steal.  
 Because everything around you is yours.  
 Everything is yours.

This not only provides a rather droll recap of the series, but also invokes the necessity of something like the Ten Commandments or some moral code insofar as the song highlights how unappealing life would be without such things. Its satanism seems Baudelairean. In fact, as death and suffering reveal to us, given a long enough timeline, nothing is ours, and, therefore, we must do the opposite of what the song recommends, of course.

Artur, who later quits the band because of his growing obsession with his father's stamp collection, doesn't really believe what he's singing. It's in the nature of some punk rock to sing what you do not believe. The satanic pose falls away on contact with the harsh reality of his father's death, quicker than you can say "Lars von Trier." But not at the funeral, it is important to note, where, at first, Artur shuts out the proceedings by listening to his Walkman, on which he seems to be playing a recording of his own song. Ha!

Things hit home for Artur when his estranged, middle-class brother, Jerzy (Jerzy Stuhr), talks about how their father neglected them and their mother for the sake of his stamp collection. Jerzy says it all in a kind of elliptical prose poem that's much more interesting than the lyrics of City Death: "All our

misery... Mother's wasted life... no decent food, no money..." Artur replies with an equal sincerity that reveals the real person behind the mask: "What drives people to covet stuff, to possess something at any cost?" He knows what's right and wrong. He wants to understand why we grasp at worldly possessions.

Not bad for a light comic frosting on top of the series. The painful differences between love and possession seem to pervade many episodes of the *Dekalog*. This drift orients the series towards a reading of its Biblical source material as an extended meditation on loving what we cannot possess, control, or fully grasp in its astonishing, beautiful, or frightening otherness, whether that love involves a parent or a child, a lover or a spouse, a sibling or a family, or something else that, if it is there at all, loves us and wants us to love each other...

Notes from your friend JMT





## Endnotes



## Wonder

### 15

*With his new film A Hidden Life set for release over the holidays:* In *A Hidden Life* (2019), Malick tells the true-life story of Franz Jägerstätter (August Diehl), an Austrian farmer who refused to take the Hitler Oath and was executed by the Third Reich. Jägerstätter wrestles with the contradictions between his faith's imperatives and the ties of his love for his wife Franziska (Valerie Pachner) and family, as well as the ostracism of his community in St. Radegund, and the moral abyss engulfing the clergy and the legal system. With its historical, political, and devotional resonances, Malick's film centers on specific concerns of faith that, while present throughout his work, also seem clearly embedded in *The Tree of Life* (2011) and *To the Wonder* (2012).

### 16

*All of the attention of the Malick-crazed went to The Tree of Life:* In *The Tree of Life* (2011), Malick follows middle-aged executive Jack O'Brien (Sean Penn) through an interconnected series of meditations. These include memories of growing up in postwar Waco, Texas, freewheeling reflections on the origins and development of the cosmos and the evolution of life on Earth, images of the natural world, and imaginative renderings of the afterlife. The film's depiction of Jack's family—including his angry and financially unsuccessful father (Brad Pitt), his mother (Jessica Chastain), who embodies the Christian "way of grace," and his brother, R.L. (Laramie Eppler), reported killed at age 19, possibly at war—is thought to have an autobiographical basis. The film initiates an intensive period of experimentation with film form in Malick's work in the 2010s, and continues the director's collaboration with cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, which began with *The New World* (2005).

*To the Wonder feels warm, modest, troubled, mixed up, and unwieldy:* In *To the Wonder* (2012), Malick tells the story of a failed marriage between Neil (Ben Affleck) and Marina (Olga

Kurylenko), who meet in Paris, travel to Le Mont-Saint-Michel, and eventually settle together in Oklahoma, where their relationship breaks down after multiple attempts to patch things up. During one hiatus, Neil woos Jane (Rachel McAdams), but later he seeks solace and meaning in the religious ministry of Father Quintana (Javier Bardem), who tends to the area's downtrodden despite having lost his faith himself. Although very poorly received by both critics and audiences, the film continues Malick's complex experiments in joining personal (or even autobiographical) material with Lubezki's innovative digital cinematography.

## 17

*Kierkegaard's Stages on Life's Way springs to mind here*: Søren Kierkegaard, *Stages on Life's Way* [1845], trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). The prefatory note of "Hilarius Bookbinder," the figure who has "Compiled, Forwarded to the Press, and Published" these three "Studies by Various Persons," which reflect the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious worldviews, respectively, describes how he "stitches together" their writings into a single volume in order to "benefit his fellowmen" (6, 517).

## 23

"I started from the imaginary and discovered reality; but behind reality, there is again imagination": Jean-Luc Godard, "From Critic to Film-Maker" [1968], in *Cahiers du Cinéma, 1960–1968: New Wave, New Cinema, Reevaluating Hollywood*, ed. and trans. Jim Hillier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 63.

*Mundane perception "eats up things, clothes, furniture, your wife and the fear of war"*: Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device" (aka "Art as Technique") [1917/1919], in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, trans. Alexandra Berlina (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 80.

## 24

*This exilic quality*: Michel Chion presaged this element of *To the Wonder*, and noted the exilic themes of *Badlands* (1973), *Days of Heaven* (1978), and *The Thin Red Line* (1998) in his book on the latter film. “Why are we born into the world and part of the world, while at the same time feeling that we have been exiled from it?” Michel Chion, *The Thin Red Line*, trans. Trista Selous (London: British Film Institute/Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 7. Chion’s conclusion about this sense of “paradise lost” (29) in Malick’s films involves the inability of characters to communicate, including the “illusory fusion” (32) of relationships and various uncrossable “lines” (8) between people and cultures and boundaries between the human and natural worlds. Whether Malick’s emphasis changed in *The New World*, and whether there is more ambiguity and greater potential for mystical merging in his films than Chion allows, the critical links Chion traces between Malick’s films and the “emotion, universalism, and exile” (18) in Chaplin’s *The Immigrant* (1917) and Kazan’s *America America* (1963) can be applied to the characters’ peregrinations in *To the Wonder*.

*We share this “map of tenderness”*: See Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (London: Verso, 2007), 2. Bruno writes: “It seemed suitable that reimagining a map would be the next step in this cartographic trajectory of refiguring and relocating the moving image within a cultural history that engages with intimate geographies” (3).

## 26

*Kracauer called something like this process “camera-reality”*: Miriam Bratu Hansen marks distinctions between formalist defamiliarization and “camera-reality” as a critical concept in Kracauer’s writing. See Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 292–99.

32

*Berdyayev and his 1907 essay*: Nikolai Berdyaev, "Decadentism and Mystical Realism," in *The Spiritual Crisis of The Intelligentsia* [1907], trans. Fr S. Janos (Oxford: FRSJ Publications, 2015), [http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd\\_lib/1907\\_138\\_4.html](http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1907_138_4.html).

34

*Rembrandt's bathing woman*: For the image and a description of the painting, see "A Woman Bathing in a Stream," at the website of The National Gallery of Art, London, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/rembrandt-a-woman-bathing-in-a-stream-hendrickje-stoffels>. This painting's context may bear indirectly on some of Malick's themes: "Although it's not certain, this woman may be Hendrickje Stoffels, who came into Rembrandt's household to look after his infant son after his first wife, Saskia, died. Hendrickje and Rembrandt became lovers but were unable to marry."

"Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it": Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* [c. 1589–1592], Scene III (Mineola: Dover Thrift Editions, 1994), 13.

37

*The "endless maze" of folly*: William Blake, "The Voice of the Ancient Bard," in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* [facsimile of a coloured and gilded copy of the first edition] [1789/1794] (Liverpool: H. Young & Sons, 1923), 54, <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/william-blakes-songs-of-innocence-and-experience>.

39

*Charles Taylor is getting at in his A Secular Age*: Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), *passim*, esp. "Part V. Conditions of Belief," 539–773.

43

*Bardem interviewing the struggling residents in the community of Bartlesville, Oklahoma*: Chris Wiley, "The Americans Who Confessed Their Pain to Javier Bardem," *The New Yorker*, February 17, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/the-americans-who-confessed-their-pain-to-javier-bardem>.

44

"*The Kingdom of God is near, "shall come nigh," and, most intriguing, "hath come nigh"*: Robert Young, *Young's Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* [1862/1898], 1699, <https://web.archive.org/web/20161018095159/http://heraldmag.org/olb/Contents/bibles/ylt.pdf>.

45

*Lyotard's petits récits or "little narratives" factor in here*: "We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives." Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [1979], trans. Brian Massumi and Geoffrey Bennington (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 60.

46

*Cinema as a "redemption of physical reality"*: See Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* [1960] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), esp. "Revealing Functions" (46–59), and Hansen's commentary on Kracauer's use of the term "redemption" in *Cinema and Experience*, 62–64 and 286–87.

47

*Pilgrimage as a process of "wandering"*: "Thinking as a voyageuse can trigger a relation to dwelling that is much more transitive than the fixity of *oikos*, and a cartography that is errant," Bruno writes. "Wandering defines this cartography, which is guided by a fundamental remapping of dwelling" (*Atlas of Emotion*, 86). She also links wandering with wondering through the connection of curiosity and travel: "It is not only implicated in the sen-



sation of wonder, as is often noted, but located in the experience of wander" (156).

*A place that has been lost but never forgotten*: In her essay on *Knight of Cups*, Kristi McKim pinpoints the "futility" of a "longing for stasis—whether a relationship, home, or faith," an impossible yearning that is "never realizable." Kristi McKim, "Moving Away and Circling Back: On *Knight of Cups*," *New England Review* 39, no. 2 (2018): 61.

Coleridge's "*secret ministry of frost*": Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight" [1798], in *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: Oxford University Press, 1921), 240–42, <https://archive.org/details/poemsofsamueltay1921cole/page/n23/mode/2up>.

#### 48

"*One of the worst films I have seen*": See "All Audience" reviews, *To the Wonder*, Rotten Tomatoes, [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/to\\_the\\_wonder/reviews](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/to_the_wonder/reviews).

#### 49

*Experience is an "unwieldy" concept*: "As for the concept of experience, it is most unwieldy here. Like all the notions I am using here, it belongs to the history of metaphysics and we can only use it under erasure [*sous rature*]." Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967/1976], trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 65.

#### 50

*The "tasks of religious art"*: Berdyaev, "Decadentism and Mystical Realism," [http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd\\_lib/1907\\_138\\_4.html](http://www.berdyaev.com/berdiaev/berd_lib/1907_138_4.html).

51

Eliot's Four Quartets and their proposed "raid on the inarticulate": T.S. Eliot, "East Coker" [1940], in *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943), 16.

55

Wordsworth's "spots of time": William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* [1805], XII, Lines 208–15, in *Romantic Circles*, eds. Paul Youngquist and Orrin N.C. Wang (University of Colorado, Boulder), <https://romantic-circles.org/editions/poets/texts/preludeXII.html>. For a comparison of the two "dark invisible workmanship" passages in *The Prelude* of 1805 and 1850, respectively, see *The Poems of William Wordsworth, Collected Reading Texts from the Cornell Wordsworth Series, Volume 2*, ed. Jared R. Curtis (Humanities eBooks, 2009), 21, and *The Prelude, Or, Growth of a Poet's Mind* (London: Edward Moxon, 1850), 17.

57

"Ecumenical hate": Antonio Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa, "Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism: A Surprising Ecumenism," *La Civiltà Cattolica*, July 13, 2017, <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/evangelical-fundamentalism-and-catholic-integralism-in-the-usa-a-surprising-ecumenism/>.

58

*Thanks to the good folks at Grasshopper Films*: In *Thy Kingdom Come* (2018), Eugene Richards follows Javier Bardem, who is dressed in character as Father Quintana from *To the Wonder*, as the actor performs pastoral work in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Some of this footage was incorporated into Malick's film, while Richards, with the creative collaboration of Bardem, developed a 42-minute featurette from this so-called "third unit" (or additional second unit) shoot. Richards' marginalized subjects were told that Bardem was an actor and many recognized him from his previous films. Nevertheless, they agreed to speak about their personal lives, stories, and problems, in locations ranging from trailer parks to nursing homes and a local jail.

## 69

"Many of these Bob Jones and Oregon Extension alumni": Gregory Wolfe, "When Art Disrupts Religion: An Interview with Philip Salim Francis," *Image*, April 25, 2017, <https://imagejournal.org/2017/04/25/art-disrupts-religion-interview-philip-salim-francis/>.

## 76

*Brixen*: IMDb lists Brixen and "surrounding areas" as film locations for *A Hidden Life* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5827916/locations>). Cinecittà's Italian newswire service references the garden of the Bishop's Palace as a shooting location for the film (<https://news.cinecitta.com/IT/it-it/news/53/78577/la-idm-ff-commission-a-cannes-con-malick.aspx>).

## 77

*Storm*, in his commentary on *Stages on Life's Way*: D. Anthony Storm, "Second Period: Indirect Communication (1843–46), *Stages On Life's Way*," n.d., <http://sorenkierkegaard.org/stages-on-lifes-way.html>.

*Challenge to it and to "the sane society"*: Fromm argues, vis-à-vis the era of nuclear war, and technological destruction in particular, that "many psychiatrists and psychologists refuse to entertain the idea that society as a whole may be lacking in sanity. They hold that the problem of mental health in a society is only that of the number of 'unadjusted' individuals, and not that of a possible unadjustment of the culture itself." Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* [1955] (New York: Open Road, 2013), 12.

## 78

*The generation of "failed seekers"*: Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* [1971] (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2010), 178–79.

## Horror

85

*This is the story that Nietzsche dwells on:* “As we can see, this book has loaded itself down with a whole sheaf of difficult questions—but it still remains for us to add the most difficult question of all! Viewed through the optic of life, what is the meaning of—morality?” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of The Spirit of Music* [1872], trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

86

*A belief in the literal existence of the Devil:* In *The Exorcist* (1973), William Friedkin depicts the demonic possession of a 12-year-old girl, Regan MacNeil (Linda Blair), and the attempt of a priest, Father Damien Karras (Jason Miller), to exorcise the demon, which has been transported through an archeological artifact from the Middle East to Georgetown, Washington, DC. Mixing Friedkin’s signature style of realism with a story supposedly based on an actual historical incident, the film became one the highest-grossing horror movies ever made. While *The Exorcist* was nominated for Best Picture, it also was the subject of several campaigns to protest, censor, or re-rate its outrageous content.

*One possible template for von Trier’s put-on Satanism:* “Adoptive father of those ostracized / By God, and banished from his paradise, / Satan, take pity on my misery!” Charles Baudelaire, “Litanies of Satan,” in *Flowers of Evil* [1857], trans. James McGowan (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), 169–73.

*The obsession with duality in Baudelaire:* Françoise Meltzer, “Baudelaire, Maistre, and Original Sin,” *Church Life Journal*, A Journal of the McGrath Institute for Church Life, University of Notre Dame, April 9, 2019, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/ baudelaire-maistre-and-original-sin/>.

## 87

*He makes the sign of the Cross and then flips his hand into devil's horns:* In *The Kingdom* and *The Kingdom II* (1994–97), von Trier depicts a Copenhagen hospital built on the haunted site of an ancient fabric-bleaching facility. The hospital is liable to supernatural incursions of various kinds, eroding the beliefs of its Danish staff in the foundations of modern rationality. The television series blends horror and comedy, often in deliberately tasteless plotlines that showcase human perversity, absurdity, and depravity as well as hauntings, medical experiments, and the like. At the time of writing, a new and final season of the series was being planned for production.

*“Lars von Trier Antichrist”:* In *Antichrist* (2009), von Trier portrays a couple, “He” (Willem Dafoe) and “She” (Charlotte Gainsbourg), who retreat to a cabin (Eden) in the forests of the Pacific Northwest in the hopes of recuperating after the accidental death of their son. “She” is a scholar of the persecution of witches, and suffers from severe depression and panic attacks, while “He” is a therapist who arrogantly believes he can treat his wife better than the psychiatric hospital. “She” suffers from a phobia of “nature,” one which proves to be well-founded insofar as dark supernatural forces surround them in “Eden,” emanating either from the woods or from their increasingly disordered minds.

## 88

*“The effect is breathtaking and compulsive, like a drug”:* Joanna Bourke’s notes on the film formed part of an online roundtable discussion convened by Xan Brooks for Cannes 2009, “*Antichrist*: A Work of Genius or the Sickest Film in the History of Cinema?” *The Guardian*, July 15, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/jul/16/antichrist-lars-von-trier-feminism>.

90

*Combining the impulses of laughing and screaming*: James Naremore, *An Invention Without a Future: Essays on Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 124.

92

*Tarkovsky wrote something in his amazing book*: Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: The Great Russian Filmmaker Discusses His Art*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 182.

*Melancholia explores what it looks like*: *Melancholia* is a film directed by Lars von Trier and released in 2011. The film focuses on two sisters, Justine (Kirsten Dunst) and Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg). In the opening scene of the film, Justine is getting married. This doesn't go well. Justine is wracked with severe depression. Claire is helpful but also quite controlling. Soon, it is revealed that a rogue planet called *Melancholia* is entering the solar system. The fact that this heralds the apocalypse becomes increasingly clear. People become upset and do strange things. Justine, however, seems more and more at peace.

96

*"Realism is a matter of being true to life"*: Richard Rushton, *The Reality of Film: Theories of Filmic Reality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 73.

97

*The domain of clinical reason*: In her critical exchange with Rob White on the film, Nina Power argues that "*Antichrist* is a serious attempt to undermine the unthinking acceptance of modern rationality and the flat utility of technology." White, emphasizing the film's critique of Dafoe's character as a would-be man of medicine, concurs: "Calling *Antichrist* 'misogynist' is an opt-out from serious engagement, a critical short cut which reduces the film to the schematics of unconscious desire that von Trier so artfully dismantles in order to reach out to more visceral, coun-

terscientific casualties. Maybe a better way of approaching the film's gender politics is to observe that She is much the more interesting of the film's characters." Nina Power and Rob White, "Antichrist: A Discussion," *Film Quarterly*, December 1, 2009, <https://filmquarterly.org/2009/12/01/antichrist-a-discussion/>.

## 98

*These characters are most often the women in his films:* Eileen A. Joy writes of *Breaking the Waves* (1996) that "perhaps von Trier sought to locate his portrait of female sanctity outside the symbolic realm of the patriarchal Word and Law [...] Nevertheless, the film never entirely escapes a certain traditional theology in which love, figured as the passive and feminized sacrifice of one's own or someone else's life, lies at the heart of Christian belief." Eileen A. Joy, "Like Two Autistic Moonbeams Entering the Window of my Asylum: Chaucer's Griselda and Lars von Trier's Bess McNeill," *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 2, no. 3 (December 2011): 323–24.

## 102

*A "rationalized world stripped of all 'mysterious incalculable forces'":* Jane Bennett, "Modernity and Its Critics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science*, ed. Robert E. Goodin [2011] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 127–40.

## 103

*"I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature":* Munch's statement is quoted in the podcast "Munch and The Scream," *In Our Time*, BBC Radio4/BBC Sounds, March 18, 2010, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/boorbmrX>.

## 104

*A "great deceiver":* This thought experiment, usually called "the evil demon," is associated with Descartes. See René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* [1641], trans. Donald A. Cress (Cambridge: Hackett, 1993), 19, 25.

## 107

*But his Dogme 95 period is, I think, crucially important:* For some background on Dogme 95, see Ove Christensen, "Authentic Illusions — The Aesthetics of Dogme 95," *P:O. V.* 10 (December 2000), [https://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue\\_10/section\\_4/artc2A.html](https://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_10/section_4/artc2A.html). Also see Filmstruck, "'Vow of Chastity' – Films of Dogme 95," *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwmjnG9WvXU&t=3s>.

*"Today a technological storm is raging":* Thomas Vinterberg and Lars von Trier, *Dogme 95* manifesto, [https://as.vanderbilt.edu/koepnick/WorldCinema\\_f02/materials/Dogme\\_Manifesto.htm](https://as.vanderbilt.edu/koepnick/WorldCinema_f02/materials/Dogme_Manifesto.htm).

## 108

*"My supreme goal is to force the truth out of my characters and settings":* Thomas Vinterberg and Lars von Trier, "The Dogma 95 Manifesto and Vow of Chastity," *P:O. V.* 10 (December 2000), [https://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue\\_10/section\\_1/artc1A.html](https://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_10/section_1/artc1A.html).

*I think that this is exactly what von Trier is up to in 'The Five Obstructions':* *The Five Obstructions* (2003) is a 'documentary' by Lars von Trier. It takes up a 1967 experimental short film by Danish filmmaker Jørgen Leth called *The Perfect Human*. Von Trier challenges Leth to remake the film five different times, imposing more and more difficult constraints on the film each time. The end of the film includes a scene in which Leth reads a rather self-excoriating letter from von Trier about the entire project.

## 110

*Von Trier's most recent release:* In *The House That Jack Built* (2018), Matt Dillon plays a serial killer whose frustrated attempts to construct a house unfold in parallel with his murders, including one episode in which Jack plans a hunting expedition in which he shoots his partner and children for sport. While the police finally close in on his crimes, Jack retreats to a grim refrigeration facility in which he has arrayed his victims' corpses



into a house-like structure. Attempting to escape, Jack discovers a secret passageway in the floor, through which a mysterious guide figure, Verge (Bruno Ganz), leads Jack down into Hell. Rather than emerging back from the Underworld into the light, however, Jack falls into the abyss.

113

*"The more a person limits himself, the more resourceful he becomes":* Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* [1843], in *Kierkegaard's Writings, III, Part I*, trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 292.

114

*Realism in film:* On this threefold conception of cinema, see Roy Armes, *Film and Reality: An Historical Survey* (Harmondsworth: Penguin/Pelican Books, 1974), 10–11.

121

*"These children that you spit on":* David Bowie, "Changes," on *Hunky Dory* (RCA, 1971).

127

*"There looms, within abjection":* Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* [1980], trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

132

*I've always enjoyed the movie writing of Manny Farber:* See Manny Farber, *Farber on Film: The Complete Film Writings of Manny Farber* (New York: Library of America, 2016).

134

*"Abjection accompanies all religious structurings":* Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 17.

*"Modernity tends to 'repress, dodge, or fake' abjection":* Ibid., 26–27.

136

*Aristotle's concepts of catharsis and performance in the 'Poetics':* Tragedy arouses feelings of pity and fear in the audience that are held to have an effect of "purification." Aristotle, *Poetics* [c. 335 BC], trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 10. Kristeva invokes and discusses the terms "catharsis" and "poetic purification" in *Powers of Horror*, 26–28.

"Platonic death": Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 28.

## Mystery

145

*100,000 already dead from COVID-19 in America:* At the time of completing these endnotes, the official death toll in the USA alone had risen to around 747,000 (and counting).

147

*Dekalog is like a book of Chekhov stories:* In *Dekalog* (1988/89), Kieślowski presents ten films, each approximately one hour in length, about the interconnected lives of the residents of a concrete tower-block housing estate, and environs, in Poland. Each episode is thought to link to each of the Ten Commandments, while the series as a whole (and significant threads that may be drawn between episodes) arguably reflects on various aspects and tensions between and within the structure of the Commandments and modern life. Co-written with Krzysztof Piesiewicz, *Dekalog* features a score by Zbigniew Preisner and the camerawork of leading Polish cinematographers, notably Sławomir Idziak and Piotr Sobociński. Artur Barciś plays an enigmatic figure who appears in various guises in eight of ten episodes, suggesting a mysterious presence that watches over these lives and stories. The series aired on Telewizja Polska starting in December, 1989. Kieślowski's pair of feature films, *A Short Film about Killing* and *A Short Film about Love*, were released first, in March and October, 1988, respectively, with shorter versions appearing as *Dekalog* 5 and 6 in the broadcast series. This or-

der of appearance in different versions may account for the discrepancy between the release dates commonly listed for *Dekalog*. Compare, e.g., “*Dekalog* (1989–1990) Release Info,” [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0092337/releaseinfo?ref\\_=tt\\_dt\\_rdat](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0092337/releaseinfo?ref_=tt_dt_rdat) and “*Dekalog* (1988) | The Criterion Collection,” <https://www.criterion.com/films/28661-dekalog>. We have drawn on the following sources for the names (and spellings) of crew and casts in the *Dekalog* series throughout our letters: IMDb (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0092337/> and related pages), Wikipedia (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dekalog> and related entries), Krzysztof Kieślowski and Krzysztof Piesiewicz, *Decalogue: The Ten Commandments* [1990], trans. Phil Cavendish and Susanah Bluh (London: Faber, 1991), Paul Coates et al., *Dekalog: Directed by Krzysztof Kieślowski* (The Criterion Collection, 2016), 20 (“Credits”) and 21–23 (“Casts”), and the DVD credits at the end of each episode of the 2016 restored *Dekalog* boxed set from Criterion.

149

Double Lives, Second Chances is recapitulated and expanded in her interview with the Criterion Collection: This interview with Insdorf is contained within the featurette “Kieślowski’s Masterful Poetry,” *Dekalog* 10 (The Criterion Collection, DVD Supplement).

150

*My class in Richmond*: The authors are deeply grateful to VCUarts, to the Cinema Program, and to the Grace Street Theater at Virginia Commonwealth University for the invitation, support, facilities, and permissions to screen all ten episodes of Kieślowski’s *Dekalog* in a single day and evening as part of the VCUarts Cinematheque series on October 14, 2017. Special thanks to the students who attended and contributed to our discussions at this marathon event, and in related class meetings.

150

"Critical reaction to the film was largely enthusiastic": Geoff Andrew, *The 'Three Colours' Trilogy* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), 19.

151

*Kieślowski and Piesiewicz pierced his heart*: Stanley Kubrick, "Foreword," in Kieślowski and Piesiewicz, *Decalogue*, vii.

153

"Somebody who doesn't know, somebody who's searching": Kieślowski quoted in Andrew, *The 'Three Colours' Trilogy*, 20.

*And that stunning first episode of Dekalog*: *Dekalog 1* deals with the commandment, "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me." In *Dekalog 1* we meet a university professor (Henryk Baranowski) and his 12-year-old son Paweł (Wojciech Kłata). The father and son engage in various problem-solving games using early versions of personal computers. One day, father and son use the computer, which has oddly turned itself on, to calculate whether the ice in a nearby pond can hold Paweł's weight. The computer confirms that it can. The next day, Paweł does not come home after school and his father searches for him. Later, Paweł's body is fished from the pond. He drowned when the ice broke. In the final, and crushing scene of the film, the father, overcome with grief, upends a make-shift altar at a nearby site where a church is being built. One of the knocked-over candles drips wax onto the face of a Madonna icon, who now appears to be crying.

169

*Sin as an all-encompassing explanation*: See Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* [1986] (New York: Knopf, 2010), 327.

171

"Every other (one) is every (bit) other": This phrase (*tout autre est tout autre*) is discussed in Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*

[1992], trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 68, 79. Richard Kearney's critique of this Derridean concept involves his concern with "discernment" as a categorical element of his theory of "anatheism." "Not every stranger is divine," and, therefore, we need to distinguish between the harmful and the holy, without opening ourselves to "just any kind of Other simply because they are other." Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (2009; New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 45, 46. Derrida's radically nondualistic openness to alterity, however nerve-wracking, insists on an aporetic structure that Kearney's concept of "discernment" attempts to break through. Kearney's framework contains its own awareness of the more intractable ethical and political concerns around such dead certainties (in reality, thorny problems) as knowing friend from foe.

## 173

*Spinoza's remarks about "god or nature":* Spinoza, *The Ethics and Other Works* [1677], ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 59, 116.

## 174

*The Second Commandment:* In *Dekalog* 2, a doctor (Aleksander Bardini) is approached by his musician neighbor, Dorota (Krystyna Janda), with a problem. She's pregnant with her lover's baby while her husband, Andrzej (Olgierd Łukaszewicz), is seriously ill with cancer. Dorota demands that the doctor swear to God that Andrzej's case is hopeless and terminal; otherwise, she plans to abort the baby. The doctor finally complies, and Dorota keeps the baby, but Andrzej, against all medical expectations, stages a seemingly miraculous recovery. The doctor's story is used as a philosophical problem of "ethical hell" in a university classroom in *Dekalog* 8, while the implied outcome, of an adult adopting, raising, or helping a child who is not their own, also resonates in different ways with the storylines of *Dekalog* 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 9.

"A *cinema of unknowing*": J.M. Tyree is grateful to The School of World Studies and the Religious Studies Program at Virginia Commonwealth University for their invitation to deliver the 2018 Powell-Edwards Lecture on Religion and the Arts, "Towards a Cinema of Unknowing." Beyond the cinematic considerations discussed here, Kearney's concept of "anatheism" charts similar ground in a related fashion by connecting the power of the arts to a religious "way of seeking and sounding the things we consider sacred but can never fully fathom or prove." Richard Kearney, *Anatheism*, 3. Kearney deploys the Socratic notion of "not-knowing" to describe the "heart of spiritual experience" (55) and creative work that contains "the 'holy insecurity' of radical openness to the strange" (5). Kearney's main assertion, that "a primary scene of religion" involves "the encounter with a radical Stranger who we choose, or don't choose, to call God" (7), can be connected with Derrida's questions about otherness and neighborliness, as well as with Kieślowski's meditations on who is a stranger and who is a neighbor in the apartment buildings depicted in *Dekalog*. But while Kearney seeks out overlapping areas between religion and art as modes of approaching alterity in the form of "dispossessive bewilderment" (8), this strategy also attempts to synthesize distinctions between "the religious and the irreligious, the secular and the sacred" (9). Kieślowski's series — and his artistic self-definition as someone who "doesn't know" — might be seen as a grand symphony of "anatheism." Alternatively, Kieślowski's films also might be understood as an artistic challenge to any philosophical attempt to synthesize art, ethics, and religion. The fissures between these realms, especially when viewed through a more Kierkegaardian lens, resist any clear-cut convergence.

*God "can well be loved, but he cannot be thought"*: This key passage is from Chapter 6 of *The Cloud of Unknowing* [14th century]. See A.C. Spearing, "Introduction: Doctrine and History," in *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works* (London: Penguin, 2001), Kindle eBook location 294. William Johnston glosses this

passage in his own notes on *The Cloud*: “This is pretty stark. God can be loved but he cannot be thought. He can be grasped by love but never by concepts. So less thinking and more loving.” William Johnston, “Introduction,” in *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counseling* [1996] (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 7.

## 182

*A modernized translation of The Cloud: The Cloud of Unknowing: A New Translation*, trans. Carmen Acevedo Butcher (Boston: Shambhala, 2009), 21.

*A detour into Blue is in order*: In *Three Colors: Blue* (1993), the first film in the trilogy, Kieślowski tells the story of Julie (Juliette Binoche), who loses her husband and her daughter in a car accident. Initially withdrawing from society, Julie gradually recognizes a need for human connection, and eventually decides to complete her husband’s musical composition dedicated to the reunification of Europe. In addition to its chromatic leitmotif, *Blue* also considers various forms of love, from the carnal to the spiritual, and love’s complex relationship with freedom, in conversation with the symbolic meaning of the color in the French national flag.

## 183

“Hyper-analytical” knowledge or intellect: Butcher, trans., *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 17.

## 186

*What he calls an “empathy machine”*: Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film – An Odyssey: Episode 1 – The Birth of the Cinema* (Channel 4/More4, 2011).

## 188

*Your point of view on the Commandments seems well-suited to ‘Dekalog 3’*: *Dekalog 3* deals with the commandment, “remember the Sabbath day, keep it holy.” In *Dekalog 3* a taxi driver named

Janusz (Daniel Olbrychski) sees an ex-lover named Ewa (Maria Pakulnis) at church on Christmas Eve. Ewa goes to Janusz's house and asks him for help in finding her missing husband. Janusz agrees, even though this means abandoning his family on Christmas Eve. The pair searches throughout Warsaw all night. They go to hospitals, a drunk tank, and a train station. Finally, Ewa admits that her husband left her years ago and that she only asked for Janusz's help as a kind of game. If Janusz helped her, she would go on living. If he did not, she planned to kill herself. At the end of the film, Janusz returns to his family and agrees never to see Ewa again.

## 198

*Dorota Stalińska*: See the Credits section for "Decalogue 3 (Dekalog III)," in Renata Bernard and Steven Woodward, eds., *Krzysztof Kieślowski: Interviews* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2016).

## 201

*This faith gets another strange and interesting twist in Dekalog 4*: In *Dekalog 4*, The Fourth Commandment ("Honor thy father and thy mother," in the Catholic rendition of the Decalogue) tests filial piety to the breaking point. Anka (Adrianna Biedrzyńska) lives with Michal (Janusz Gajos), whose wife, Anka's mother, is long since deceased. The episode centers on the question of whether or not Michal is Anka's biological father and how this knowledge might impact on their relationship. Anka's mother has left behind a letter that might contain the answer, but Michal has sealed it inside another envelope, stating that it is only to be opened after his death. While this implies that Michal suspects the worst and doesn't wish to know the truth, Anka, for her part, forges a letter in her mother's handwriting claiming that another man is her father. While their relationship is dramatized in deeply uncomfortable scenes of quasi-Freudian tension, they ultimately follow an ethical path, in recognition of their familial roles in one another's lives as father and daughter being more important than either genetic heritage or destruc-



tive sexual drives. Understanding that the answer contained in the original letter is just a piece of information, they burn it, only viewing its startling first line. As with many of the other episodes, questions are raised here about what makes for a family, and about the differences and boundaries between different categories of love as they relate to ethical imperatives. Despite its dramatic emphasis on the father, *Dekalog* 4 also reorients the Commandment towards the absent mother; this drift also connects the episode with the missing mothers in *Dekalog* 1 and 7.

## 205

*Red and Dekalog 4 probably only “work” in their most meaningful ways within a Freudian context:* In *Three Colors: Red* (1994), Kieślowski culminates the interwoven stories of his *Three Colors* trilogy with a story set in Geneva, Switzerland, about an unlikely friendship between a student and fashion model, Valentine (Irène Jacob), and a retired judge, Joseph Kern (Jean-Louis Trintignant). Kern is involved in the illegal wiretapping of his neighbors, including Karin (Frederique Feder), the girlfriend of Auguste (Jean-Pierre Lorit), who is Valentine’s neighbor. Kern, who may possess some form of second sight, encourages Valentine to travel to England, taking a ferry on which Auguste also will be traveling in order to recover from his breakup with Karin. The boat sinks but Valentine and Auguste survive together, along with the protagonists of the first two films in the Trilogy, *Blue* and *White*. As the characters from all three films merge in the final sequence of the last film, so too do Kieślowski’s pre-occupations throughout with chance, fate, and interconnected lives and stories.

## 208

*“There is an invisible but fallible authority presiding over the world within the film”:* Georgina Evans, “*Red: A Fraternity of Strangers*,” *Criterion.com*, November 15, 2011, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/2064-red-a-fraternity-of-strangers>.

213

*But I did want to check in and gauge your own response to Dekalog 5:* *Dekalog 5* deals with the commandment “thou shalt not kill.” In *Dekalog 5*, a young man named Jacek Łazar (Miroslaw Baka) takes a taxi driven by Waldemar Rekowski (Jan Tesarz). Jacek directs Waldemar to a forlorn spot outside of the city. There, he strangles Waldemar with a rope he has been carrying all day. Waldemar is not killed by the strangulation and the excruciating scene finally concludes with Jacek finishing Waldemar off with a large stone. The rest of the film concerns the trial and sentencing of Jacek, who is defended by an idealistic lawyer named Piotr Balicki (Krzysztof Globisz). Piotr learns much about Jacek’s life during his attempted defense, including the fact that Jacek’s young sister was killed in a drunk driving accident. Jacek is, nevertheless, condemned to the death penalty. Piotr is present in the final moment as Jacek is, in a brutal and unforgettable scene, hanged by the state. Piotr is deeply shaken by this experience and mutters the line, “I abhor it,” in the last scene of the film.

219

*Dekalog 5 and A Short Film about Killing:* Kieslowski developed two linked feature films, *A Short Film about Killing* and *A Short Film about Love*, from the footage filmed for *Dekalog 5* and 6, respectively. The features were released in 1988 in advance of the television broadcast of *Dekalog*, and they differ in length and sometimes in narrative structure or scene order from the episodes. The extraordinary cinematography by Sławomir Idziak, with its green-filtered world, also forms much of the visual basis for Idziak’s dream-like camerawork on *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991).

*There’s a visual rhyme apparent:* See Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film – An Odyssey: Episode 12 – Fight the Power: Protest in Film* (Channel 4/More4, 2011).

## 221

*Magda confronts Tomek's gaze*: In *Dekalog 6* and *A Short Film about Love* (1988), Tomek (Olaf Lubaszenko) steals a telescope in order to spy on his neighbor, Magda (Grażyna Szapołowska). Although he's caught and beaten up for being a peeping tom, he makes a point of not watching Magda's sexual encounters. Magda catches Tomek at her door, inviting him inside only to sexually humiliate him. Tomek attempts suicide, while Magda reconsiders whether Tomek's feelings have more depth than she recognized. As Magda learns more about Tomek, including that he was raised in an orphanage, she develops protective feelings for him that also upend her own sense of self. Having previously rejected Tomek's professions of love, and claiming that love is only another word for sex, Magda begins to believe that love exists.

## 222

*Sexualizing the women onscreen and identifying with the quest of the male protagonist*: Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

## 223

*"Epistemological quests"*: Tomasulo compares the "epistemological quests for certainty in an ambiguous world" of Hitchcock's Jeffries (Jimmy Stewart) and Antonioni's Thomas (David Hemmings). Frank P. Tomasulo, "'You're Tellin' Me You Didn't See': Hitchcock's *Rear Window* and Antonioni's *Blow-Up*," in *After Hitchcock: Influence, Imitation, and Intertextuality*, eds. David Boyd and R. Barton Palmer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 147. Tomasulo quotes Antonioni's remark that "Hitchcock's films are completely false, especially the endings [...]. Life is inconclusive" (165).

## 232

*"The idea of order"*: Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West" [1934], in *Ideas of Order* (New York: Alcestis Press, 1935),

available online via The Poetry Foundation: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43431/the-idea-of-order-at-key-west>.

## 235

*The bleak picture of Dekalog 7: Dekalog 7* deals with the commandment “thou shalt not steal.” The film revolves around the story of a young woman, Majka (Maja Barelkowska), living with her parents and her little sister Ania (Katarzyna Piwowarczyk). But as we learn during the course of the film, the little sister is actually Majka’s daughter, born after an affair with a teacher named Wojtek (Bogusław Linda). Majka’s mother, Ewa (Anna Polony), has been pretending to be Ania’s mother when she is, in fact, her grandmother. Majka cannot abide this ruse and ‘steals’ her daughter Ania in an attempt to force Ewa to allow mother and daughter to emigrate to Canada. In the course of their flight, Majka and Ania end up at the house of Wojtek, Ania’s father. Wojtek is torn between helping Ania and staying true to his deal with Ewa, a deal which kept him from serious repercussions due to his seduction of the sixteen-year-old Majka. At the end of the film, Majka gives Ania back to Ewa at a train station, but boards a train alone and to a fate unknown.

## 242

*No End turns the conventionally religious idea of eternity on its head:* In *No End* (1985), as in *Blind Chance* (1987), Kiesłowski bridges his early emphasis on social problems and political dissidence in communist Poland with his later reflections on the uncanny and the metaphysical. Ulla (Grażyna Szapołowska) is a translator whose husband, Antek (Jerzy Radziwiłowicz), haunts her after his death. Meanwhile, Derek (Artur Barciś), who has been jailed for his role in the Solidarity movement under Poland’s period of martial law (1981–1983), also encounters Antek from beyond the grave. The lives of Ulla and Derek link the realms of the personal and the political. Ulla decides to join Antek in the afterlife by suicide. Critics regard *No End* with particular importance as Kiesłowski’s first collaboration with both

Piesiewicz and Preisner, while the appearance of Barciś presages his performance in *Dekalog*.

## 247

*The devastating experience of Dekalog 8:* In *Dekalog 8*, Elżbieta (Teresa Marczevska), who, as a Jewish girl, was saved from death during the nazi occupation, returns to Poland to confront her past. She visits the classroom of Zofia (Maria Kościółkowska), a professor whose life and work has long intrigued her. Zofia, in turn, had been a member of the Resistance during the war, but had turned away Elżbieta from her door one night when the girl needed shelter and disguise from the nazi authorities. As Elżbieta and Zofia learn more about one another, Zofia reveals not only that her reason for turning away Elżbieta was her belief that a Gestapo informer was in their midst, but also that she lived to deeply regret her decision. Zofia invites Elżbieta to spend the night in her home, and then takes her to see a tailor (Tadeusz Łomnicki) who had helped to save Elżbieta's life on that fateful night. While the tailor refuses to discuss anything with Elżbieta, Zofia forms a bond of friendship with the younger woman during her visit, based upon an honest reckoning with the past. According to an interview (The Criterion Collection, DVD Supplement), the episode is partly based on the childhood experiences of the Jewish Polish writer Hanna Krall. The Eighth Commandment, forbidding false witness, expands here into a larger meditation on truth and faith as they span the personal, the ethical, the philosophical, the historical, and the political.

## 249

*Stanley Hauerwas often quotes a Jewish theologian friend of his:* This idea can be found in many books, essays, and interviews by Stanley Hauerwas. It's a core touchpoint in his argument about law as actually meaning something to our daily lives. Stanley Hauerwas, "Christian Practice and the Practice of Law in a World without Foundations," *Mercer Law Review* 44, no. 3 (1993): 750, [https://digitalcommons.law.mercer.edu/cgi/view-content.cgi?article=1354&context=jour\\_mlr](https://digitalcommons.law.mercer.edu/cgi/view-content.cgi?article=1354&context=jour_mlr).

255

"Films cannot be said to offer representations of the world or of some purportedly 'real' or 'true' world": Rushton, *The Reality of Film*, 13.

256

"Ideological obfuscation or nostalgic (self-)deception": Thomas Elsaesser argues that classical cinema might offer something "more complex" than this, but nevertheless maintains "Benjamin's idea that cinema is *Erlebnis*, rather than *Erfahrung*." Thomas Elsaesser, "Between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*: Cinema Experience with Benjamin," *Paragraph* 32, no. 3 (November 2009): 296.

"historic decline with the proliferation of *Erlebnis*": Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 15.

257

"to experience" [*Erleben*] without spirit is comfortable": Walter Benjamin, "Experience" [1913], in *Selected Writings: 1913–1926, Volume 1*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 5.

"The yet unnamable glimmer beyond the closure": Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967/1976], trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 14.

"The film in the viewer's head": Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 301.

260

*Dekalog 9 links exercise with suicide*: *Dekalog 9* deals with the commandment "thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife." In *Dekalog 9*, a doctor named Roman Nycz (Piotr Machalica) finds out that he is impotent. He informs his wife Hanka (Ewa Błaszczyk) of this fact and also tells her that she should look for other lovers. Hanka is offended by this idea but eventually does initiate an affair with a young man named Mariusz (Jan

Jankowski). Roman finds out about the affair just as Hanka is trying to end it. Through a series of unfounded suspicions and misunderstandings, Roman comes to believe that Hanka is leaving him for Mariusz and attempts to kill himself by riding his bicycle, pathetically, off of a bridge. The attempt fails. Roman and Hanka are reunited.

267

"Allusive indeterminacy": Kracauer, quoted in Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 300.

269

"Ideas, not money": Cousins, *The Story of Film – Episode 1*.

*Doesn't Tarkovsky compare the cinematic image with the haiku?:* "The image as a precise observation of life takes us straight back to Japanese poetry." Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 106. Tarkovsky recalls Eisenstein's interest in haiku for its "observation of life — pure, subtle, one with its subject" (66).

270

*Benjamin's experience of aura under the influence of hashish:* "Genuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain things, as people imagine." Walter Benjamin, quoted in Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 129. The phrase is drawn from the essay "Hashish, Beginning of March 1930." Cf. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927–1934*, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al., eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 328, and *On Hashish*, trans. Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 58.

271

*Those invisible strands or strings that might connect us:* See Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* [1925], ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 95.

276

"For example, if by telling a lie you have in fact hindered someone who was even now planning a murder": Immanuel Kant, "On A Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns" [1797], in *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 3rd edn., trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1992), 105–6. Steven Levine recommended and helped to interpret this and other philosophical texts.

282

*Individual, collective, and national identity and responsibility*: For a concise journalistic overview of the law, see Brigit Katz, "Poland's President Signs Highly Controversial Holocaust Bill into Law," *Smithsonian Magazine*, January 29, 2018 [updated, February 7, 2018], <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/poland-grants-initial-approval-controversial-death-camp-bill-180967975/>.

283

*The "angel of history"*: "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (or "On the Concept of History") [1940], translated by Harry Zohn, in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), 201.

297

*An ongoing condition of ceaseless change*: "What was some time ago dubbed (erroneously) 'post-modernity' and what I've chosen to call, more to the point, 'liquid modernity,' is the growing conviction that change is *the only* permanence, and uncertainty *the only* certainty." Bauman, "Foreword to the 2012 Edition," Kindle eBook location, 256. Bauman's original formulation suggested that ours is an "individualized, privatized version of modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual's shoulders. It is the patterns of dependency and interaction whose turn to be liquefied has now come. They are now malleable to an extent unexperienced by, and unimaginable for, past generations; but



like all fluids they do not keep their shape for long.” Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 8.

297

“Ostensibly unquestionable premises of our way of life”: Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 5.

300

*Cardinal August Hlond's belief*: Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930–1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 14. Phayer relates Hlond’s “indifference” to the postwar Kielce massacre, a 1946 pogrom based on antisemitic “blood libel” accusations of child kidnapping (265). More generally, Phayer argues, the anti-Jewish nazi laws of 1941 raised Vatican concerns “for the rights of Jewish converts” because they elevated race over religion, and, therefore, interfered with conversions that resulted from weddings, for example (14).

301

*Contemporary fundamentalism is itself a thoroughly modern outgrowth of pseudo-scientific claims for religion*: “After Dayton [Tennessee, the site of the 1925 Scopes Trial in which the state’s ban on teaching evolution in schools was overturned], fundamentalists closed their minds even more, and Creationism and an unswerving biblical literalism became central to the fundamentalist mindset. They also drifted to the far right of the political spectrum.” Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 178.

*Roman/Romek*: In *Dekalog* 9, Hanka usually (but not always) calls her husband Roman “Romek,” using the Polish diminutive. (Her given name is “Hanna” but she is also nicknamed “Hanka” and “Hania.”) Somewhat confusingly, the pamphlet accompanying the Criterion Collection boxed DVD set of *Dekalog* films lists this character, played by Piotr Machalica (who also appears briefly in *Dekalog* 6), as both “Roman” (*Dekalog* 6 cast list) and

“Romek” (*Dekalog* 9 cast list). See Paul Coates et al., *Dekalog: Directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski* (The Criterion Collection, 2016), 22, 23. It’s notable that Roman appears very briefly in Tomek’s story in *Dekalog* 6. Both characters suffer from episodes of sexual dysfunction that turn into suicide attempts, drawing a thread here between their lives related to their conventional/dysfunctional ideas about manhood (which also applies to Karol Karol’s impotence in *White*). Some interesting freeplay in the chronology of the episodes seems to be at work here. In *Dekalog* 6, Roman is glimpsed leaving his apartment building on his bicycle. Roman’s workout sweatshirt makes clear that this is not the same day on which he attempted to kill himself (on that fateful day, he’s wearing his leather jacket). It does seem significant, however, that this bicycle is the means by which he attempts suicide in *Dekalog* 9, falling from what appears to be an incomplete bridge. The series provides some tempting clues about when various events might have happened by using cues related to seasons and weather. *Dekalog* 6 features green leaves and light jackets. *A Short Film about Love* adds the detail, not included in the television version, of Tomek breaking ice off the roof of his building to put on his face. *Dekalog* 9 portrays the mountain ski resort of Zakopane, on the border of present-day Slovakia, as being open, while heavy downpours are taking place back in the city. This suggests a gradual movement towards thaws, literal and poetic, in the series, which begins with the deadly winter ice of *Dekalog* 1 and proceeds to the nearly fatal Christmas darkness of *Dekalog* 3. All of this suggests that both *Dekalog* 6 and 9 might take place around the same point in the Spring (perhaps in April, that cruelest month?), but the chronology here may not add up definitively. Tomek might be seeing Roman before or after Roman’s suicide attempt, in other words, but these events seem adjacent in time, and Tomek’s own suicide attempt occurs shortly afterwards. Another thing that binds together *Dekalog* 6 and 9 involves these episodes’ shared theme of love’s potential beyond the physical realm of sexual eros. Hanka specifically emphasizes this point to Roman after his diagnosis of impotence, while Magda eventually accepts Tomek’s belief in something of

the same kind. (Following a different thread, Roman glimpses Majka's daughter Ania, from *Dekalog* 7, playing outside his building, perhaps in a nod to both episodes' theme of adoption, while Tomek is an orphan who lives with his godmother.) Intertextuality in the *Dekalog* series is complex, tightly woven, and thematically resonant between these parallel lives, not only building bridges but also revealing lacunae between episodes and heartrending gaps between characters. Might Tomek and Roman have helped one another? Even this single detail, regarding their passing encounter in *Dekalog* 6, which comprises only a few seconds of film, illuminates larger questions of chance and fate while questioning the notion of providence.

## 303

*The name of a friend in Krakow mentioned casually in Dekalog 9, Mikołaj:* In *Three Colors: White* (1994), the second (and least well-received) film in the Trilogy, Kieślowski portrays the relationship between the Polish Karol Karol (Zbigniew Zamachowski) and the French Dominique Vidal (Julie Delpy). After finding himself unable to consummate their marriage, Karol is divorced by an angry Dominique, who also steals his money and burns down his hair salon. Karol returns to Poland. Taking on various odd jobs, he finds himself in the pay of Mikołaj (Janusz Gajos), who tries to get Karol to kill him, although Mikołaj is grateful to be alive when this strange "suicide-by-contract-murder" ploy fails. Karol involves himself in various schemes to get rich, eventually succeeding. Finally, he fakes his own death so that he can observe Dominique's mourning and, subsequently, have her arrested for his own "murder." While *White* ends with Karol watching Dominique in her prison cell, the ending of the Trilogy in *Red* implies that the couple somehow eventually return to one another's orbit. They survive the ferry disaster along with *Blue's* Julie and *Red's* Valentine.

## 304

*The actor who portrays the French Veronique:* In *The Double Life of Veronique* (1991), Irène Jacob plays a double role as Weronika, a Polish singer, and Véronique, a French music teacher. These characters' lives are mysteriously connected. Weronika dies while singing a choral piece by Van den Budenmayer. Meanwhile, Véronique appears to be teaching her students to play the same piece of music. After a disturbing encounter with a puppeteer, Alexandre Fabbri (Philippe Volter), Véronique discovers that he plans to write a book about a woman born with a double. She leaves him and returns home to visit her father, rescuing herself from an Orphic Underworld of sorts, on a larger quest to find herself.

## 309

*Kieślowski stays quite close to this sense of comedy in 'Dekalog 10':* In *Dekalog 10*, two brothers, Artur (Zbigniew Zamachowski) and Jerzy (Jerzy Stuhr), mourn the death of their father, in the process discovering their dad's extensive (and, as is eventually revealed) incredibly valuable stamp collection. While the brothers are estranged — Jerzy is straight-laced, while Artur sings for a rock band called City Death — their increasing obsession with the stamp collection brings them together. In their attempt to complete their father's quest to acquire an elusive third stamp in an ultra-rare series, the brothers enter into a deal with a shady dealer who demands that Jerzy donate his kidney to his sick daughter in exchange for the stamp. Drawn to the hospital during the organ harvesting surgery by brotherly love, Artur leaves their father's stamp collection in the protection of a guard-dog, and behind metal bars he has installed on the windows. But the dog turns out to be extremely friendly to the thieves who break in and steal the fortune. Initially the brothers turn on one another during the investigation of the crime, each believing the other is behind the theft, but they finally recognize they've been swindled, and, eventually, reconcile, sharing a laugh of brotherly love over the fact that they have both been to the post office, and chosen the same new common stamps to start building a new

collection, for fun more than profit. The images of and jokes about the stamps as a series reflect on the *Dekalog* itself as a television series, while the plot extends the Tenth Commandment ("Thou shall not covet") from literal to more metaphorical territory. The postal service (Episode 6), postmen characters (2, 6), stamps (8, 10), postcards (9), and letters (4) are threaded throughout the *Dekalog*, suggesting the series and/or its filmmakers as a metaphorical postal-like organization that connects the characters and homes of the community whose addresses we've been exploring.

## 311

*Klee, too, apparently used a print of a Cranach painting of Luther for mounting his own image:* For the connections between Benjamin, Klee, and Quaytman, see Holland Cotter, "R.H. Quaytman's Variations on Klee's Angel," *The New York Times*, November 5, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/06/arts/design/rh-quaytmans-variations-on-klees-angel.html>. A brief description of the PBS series, *Alive from Off Center*, and Laurie Anderson's film, "What You Mean We?" are available from WGBH's Open Vault online resource, [https://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V\\_F879015D656D4D78A5D7ED987E79E25E](https://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_F879015D656D4D78A5D7ED987E79E25E). It's also described by David Pescovitz in "Watch Laurie Anderson's fantastic 'What You Mean We?' (1986) from PBS's 'Alive from Off Center,'" *BoingBoing*, December 24, 2019, <https://boingboing.net/2019/12/24/watch-laurie-andersons-fanta.html>.

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